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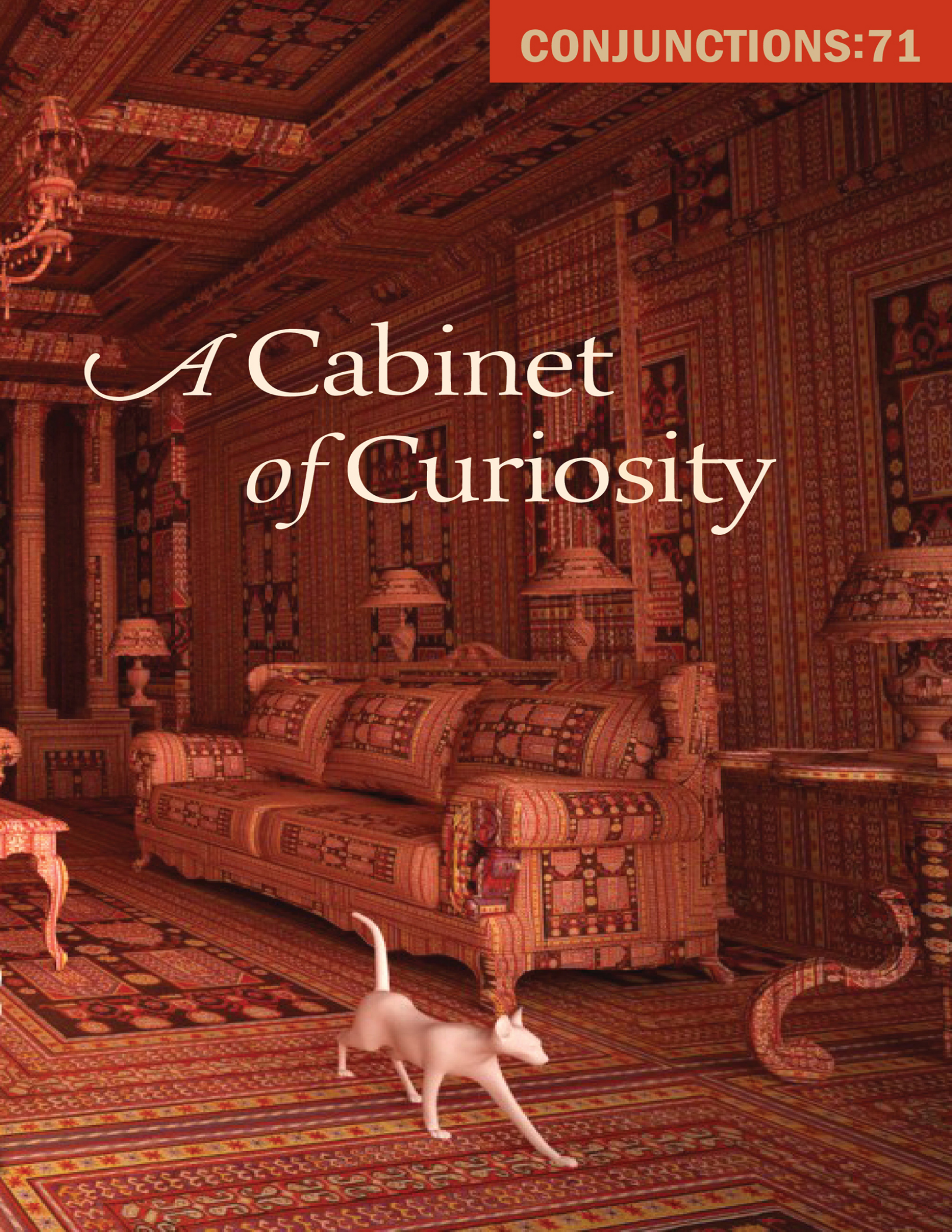

A Cabinet of Curiosity

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A Cabinet of Curiosity

Conjunctions

Edited by Bradford Morrow

CONJUNCTIONS

Bi-Annual Volumes of New Writing

Edited by
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Edited by Bradford Morrow

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Curiosity is as central to life as breathing. And like breath itself, when it ceases, the vibrancy of life fades and disappears. Curiosity leads to discoveries both beneficent and, at times, destructive. It often occasions wonderment, but also terror. It prompts the precise scientist, but also the nosy gadfly. A double-edged sword, curiosity has forever held a crucial role in myth, literature, science, philosophy, history—nearly every field of human endeavor. While most of us know the old saying about curiosity killing the cat, we must also remember that "satisfaction brought it back." Curiosity incites and compels, taketh away and giveth.

In this issue, curiosity impels a personal assistant to learn hidden truths about her deceased employer—a famed playwright—and his relationship with the woman who directs an Italian arts foundation to which he donated his priceless library of first editions. A novelist, inspired by a different kind of curiosity, studies the traditional teachings of his Cherokee forebears after reading the notebook his beloved grandfather possessed when he died. Elsewhere, a young boy removes his clothes and, driven by dangerous curiosity, crawls into the gaping darkness of a sewer pipe, where he mysteriously vanishes, altering the lives of everyone who knew him. While most of the stories, poems, and memoirs here investigate the places where curiosity transports us—from forgotten burial grounds to natural history museums, from alluring lakes to postapocalyptic seaside shanties—*A Cabinet of Curiosity* also features a singular visit to an archetypal curiosity cabinet in Amsterdam with its treasury of specimens, of oddities in jars and on shelves, of things pinned and things afloat.

Curiosity in all its guises is the wellspring of revelation. It is a prime mover behind our deeds, good or evil, simple or complicated. While the thirty-one writers gathered here individually explore many of the ways in which curiosity drives and defines us, together they propose that the realms of curiosity are, finally, inexhaustible.

—Bradford Morrow
October 2018
New York City

Transfer

Laura van den Berg

After the sudden death of my employer, I was tasked with overseeing the transfer of his personal library. The books would travel from his studio in New York City to an arts foundation in Italy, where my employer had once enjoyed a long and productive stay, many years in the past. He was a playwright—a very famous one—and his personal library contained over five thousand books, including a number of rare volumes. I had served as his personal assistant for fifteen years; in his will he had left me a handsome bonus, to be deposited after the library transfer, a task he apparently believed no one else was fit to complete. His three adult children, who had made it clear that they would not be keeping me on, bought me a first-class plane ticket and, upon learning I had never been before, offered to fund a short stay in Rome after the library business had been settled, lending my journey a morbid and bewildering aura, some combination of last rites and a holiday and a severance.

At the townhouse, the library was appraised and inventoried. Next I supervised a team of packers, recommended by a high-end auction house, as they wrapped each book in clean tissue (newspaper was strictly forbidden; the ink could damage the books), followed by bubble wrap; each package was then sealed in a plastic bag, to guard against moisture. If the packers found any notes or cards slipped between the pages, they were to bring them straight to me, for me to read and then hand over to my employer's son, who already had a novel about his father in the works (I had already deemed one correspondence too private and had fed it into the paper shredder). My employer had prized my attention to detail and my discretion, even if his children felt I had been too discreet in some respects, especially when it came to guarding his secrets.

Once the boxes were in transit, I photocopied the paperwork and packed the duplicates in my suitcase, which had not seen use in a very long time. As the taxi pulled away from my employer's brownstone, I realized I would never set foot in the building again; the children planned to sell, and by the time I boarded my return flight, I would be employed by the family no more.

At the airport in Rome, I was collected by the foundation director, an American woman driving a tiny white Fiat. She was only three years into her directorship, but had been in Italy long enough to have adopted the belief that one should not put milk in his or her coffee after ten in the morning because it was bad for digestion. I had met her several times before, at my employer's home, before she moved abroad; she used to attend the dinner parties he had been fond of throwing. As I waited on the curb with my luggage, I remembered sitting at his dining-room table and writing her name, Sylvie, on a cream place card with a calligraphy pen, the heavy cursive belly of the *S*, the loop of the *L*.

"Did you sleep on the plane? Do you feel delirious?" she asked me as we sped east, toward Le Marche, nestled between the Apennine Mountains and the Adriatic Sea, where the foundation was situated outside a small village.

"I'm fine," I told her. "Eager to see the books."

"Of course you are," she replied.

The drive took two hours and during this time we continued to exchange pleasantries. We never mentioned my employer directly or his manner of death, which had shocked everyone. Sylvie looked different than she had when I saw her last. Her dress—navy, sleeveless—was impeccably tailored and her wavy hair had been bobbed and streaked with blonde, the work of either chemicals or the sun. I had never known her well; after a time, her name disappeared from the guest lists, as names did on occasion, and then she returned, in a manner of speaking, after the tragic death of her son was all my employer's circle could talk about. The boy had died in a drowning accident, in the Finger Lakes region. Not long after his death, she and her husband separated and she fled to Italy and the party chatter moved on to someone else.

“I’m sure he told you all about this place,” she said as we rolled down a long driveway, arrow straight and lined with cypress trees. “He loved it here.”

The foundation grounds were every bit as lovely as I had imagined. From the outside, it looked like a hilltop town in miniature, a gated compound with a collection of stone buildings with terra-cotta tile roofs, everything connected by a network of gravel paths, embellished by rose gardens.

The director escorted me to my quarters, a room in a small building near the kitchen, the square windows framed with ivy. I had a view of the valleys with their pale rounds of hay, the green and distant hillsides.

“Dinner is at eight sharp,” the director said, just before she left me. She added that this meal would be the first held in honor of the latest group of visiting artists and I might meet some interesting people. Yet when the moment arrived, I was made invisible, as was always the case at these kinds of affairs. I was not an artist or a curator or a director or a publisher. People talked past me and over me and around me, as though there was not a human body sitting in my chair but a tall and inconveniently placed plant. The only people who showed even a vague interest in my presence were the young playwrights who wanted to be regaled with tidbits about my employer and even then I was not quite a person to them, just a conduit. I was relieved that no one was indelicate enough to ask questions about the particulars of his death.

The director was wearing the same navy dress, but had added cork wedges and a pair of round sapphire earrings. I overheard a painter ask the director if she had children and felt a sharp pang on her behalf, a feeling that evaporated the moment Sylvie fingered an earring and replied, “Why yes! I have a son, three years old this month. And you?”

We were eating in a garden, surrounded by cypress trees and pink geraniums planted in enormous red-clay pots. A long table had been placed under an arbor; ivy dangled like green tentacles from the beams. I continued to watch the director, her earrings catching and throwing the light. She did not seem sheepish about telling such a brazen lie with me in earshot; she was simply a person who had a child once more. After a sip of wine, the most obvious solution presented itself and I felt suddenly daft: in three

years, she could have very well met someone in Italy and given birth to another son.

Before departing, I had secured daily Italian lessons with a private tutor and so, in the morning, I placed a few casual inquiries with the kitchen staff and learned that the director had told everyone she had a son, but no one had ever seen the boy. The director never brought him to the foundation, not even for special events, as her predecessor had; apparently he spent the weeks with his father in Florence and only the weekends, which the director enjoyed off-site, with his mother. Of course, these details only made me more curious.

"Strange situation, if you ask me," said one of the chefs.

The next day I began my work in the library and it was a good thing I had flown all the way to Italy to oversee the transfer, as the library was otherwise supervised by an ancient man in suspenders and a part-time intern from Minneapolis. The librarian shuffled around with a Walkman in his pocket and headphones in his ears; whenever I appeared I startled him so badly that he dropped whatever books he'd been carrying. We unpacked one box at a time and began cataloging my employer's library—a system that, to my horror, was not digitized. Instead we were at the mercy of the librarian's archaic method of flash cards in little plastic boxes, each entry written in inscrutable pencil. Early on, the intern had stabbed at one of the packages with the sharp end of a letter opener and I had shrieked so loudly a stream of bats fled from the upper eaves. I rushed over to the girl and took the letter opener from her hands, replacing it with a small, sharp knife and instructions to only cut the tape and to do so with *extreme care*.

I know they talked about me when I wasn't around, the librarian and the intern. Once I overheard the intern asking, in Italian, why my employer had been such a big deal, wasn't he just some playwright, and the librarian had shrugged and said, "*Gli americani sono pazzi.*"

In a hallway, I had pressed myself to a cool stone wall, breathless, surprised by my desire to smack the young intern hard in the face. My employer had sat at the center of my world for nearly two decades—if he was irrelevant to her, then what did that make me?

After all the books had been unpacked, cataloged, and bookplated, we began the process of shelving. To prepare for the donation, the foundation had constructed tall bookcases on the library's ground floor, with two inches of space between each case and the wall to encourage circulation, the wood treated with a waterborne polyurethane varnish to prevent acid from bleeding into the paper. Each case had its own laced iron door, with its own skeleton key. Soon a person would be able to stand in the center of the room, on a glazed tile floor the color of pomegranates, and be surrounded by my employer's vast collection. The library had long windows—scenic but the sunlight was a concern for the rarest and most expensive books, so a temperature-controlled glass case had been installed in a different room for a handful of select items including first editions of *Leaves of Grass* and *Ulysses*.

I was transferring one of these volumes, a rare edition of Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger*, into the special case when an envelope slipped out from between the pages. I collected the slash of cream from the carpet and slipped it into my pocket, making a mental note to inform the auction house that the packers had done a subpar job of following my instructions.

In my room, I stretched out on a small sofa by a window—I could hear birdsong through the glass—and examined the envelope. There was no address or postage; the back flap was not sealed. From the scent of the paper, I could tell the envelope, and whatever it contained, had been between the pages of *Goldfinger* for some time. I opened the letter and pulled out a single sheet of stationery. The letter was addressed to the residency director, Sylvie, and signed by my employer; even before I glimpsed his name at the bottom I recognized his impeccable cursive script, the product of a lifetime of fine private schooling. From the letter I learned that he'd carried on an affair with Sylvie and the son she'd lost in the drowning accident had not been fathered by her husband, or ex-husband, but rather by my employer. The letter was dated several months after the boy died and each sentence sang out with regret—how he wished he had gotten to know his son, how he had been a coward, too afraid of his three spoiled and overbearing adult children, too afraid of his long-suffering wife, to do so much as acknowledge the child and now it was too late, far too

late. He was sorry he had begged her to have an abortion and, when she refused, he was sorry he had ended their relationship the way he had. He was sorry she had to sit alone with the complicated layers of her suffering. The last sentence, which began *I have taken too much ...*, trailed off, uncompleted.

I put the letter down and listened to the birds. Before I left for Italy, my employer's son had asked me to read a chapter from his novel in progress, in which the father (who had been transformed from a playwright into a sculptor) has too much to drink while dining with his family in the countryside and, on the drive home, because it was understood the sculptor would still drive no matter how much he'd had to drink, had swerved to miss a deer, careened through a fence, and beached the car in a lush green field. Then the father hoisted the boys onto the roof and instructed them on constellations while the mother wept in the front seat. *He was magical and terrible, and he despised every one of us*—that was how the chapter ended. My employer's son wanted my opinion on whether the father character seemed "accurate" and I had wanted to tell him that, in the end, I had not known my employer as well as they had believed.

I wondered at what point my employer decided the letter was not one he would send and if he already knew, at the time of the writing, that one day not so far in the future he would take his own life.

All night, I flopped around in bed, trying to decide what to do. If I had discovered the letter in New York, I would have destroyed it at once, but finding the correspondence at the foundation, with its intended recipient not a hundred paces from where I slept—well, these facts altered the terms. More than anything, though, I kept thinking about writing *Sylvie* with the calligraphy pen, the fat *S* and the looping *L*, and then her name being replaced by someone else's. My employer had had many affairs through the years, most of which I'd been at least passingly aware of, but this one I had missed. Where had my mind been?

The day the library transfer was completed, I shook hands with the librarian and the intern and thanked them for their labor. I said it would have made my employer very happy to see his books in such a beautiful

place. Then I walked across the grounds and knocked on the director's office door. She invited me in, offered me an espresso.

I sat down across from her and placed the envelope on her desk.

"What's this?" She peered down at the envelope, but made no move to touch it.

"I found it in a book," I said, "while we were organizing the library. The letter was written by my employer and it was meant for you."

I leaned forward and nudged the letter a little closer to her.

"It's about your son," I said.

"My son?" She sat up very straight, her back pressed to her chair. "What would he have wanted with my son?"

"It was written after your son died," I said. "I think you can imagine what my employer might have wanted to tell you."

"I don't know what you mean." The director gave me a pinched smile. Her hands were in her lap, but there was enough space between her chair and the desk for me to see her long fingers coil into fists. "I saw my son just this morning."

"Sylvie," I said. "Let's stop this. Please."

All the windows were open, the linen curtains billowing in the breeze. The gardener kept a team of hounds on the edge of the property, and I could hear them baying in their kennels.

"This is a strange conversation," she said. "Brought on by a strange woman. I can't say it was ever clear to me what he saw in you."

"Show me a photo," I said next, with the cool of a detective closing in on a suspect.

"What?" The *a* stretched with genuine surprise.

"Show me a photo of your son that was taken right here, in Italy."

The director stood and went to the espresso machine in the corner of her office. She placed a tiny white cup under the spout and pulled the handle to tighten the contraption, but she did not press the button. She just stood there frowning down into the empty cup and then finally abandoned whatever private negotiation she had been engaged in and returned to her desk.

"I owe you nothing," she said, sitting back down.

I was starting to wonder if a miraculous transformation had occurred during the director's time in Italy—if, through the powers of her own imagination, she had managed to liberate herself from the terrible reality of her grief. I was fascinated by the possibility of such a transformation and wanted to better understand the inner workings. On the one hand, the correct part of my character had wanted to force the director to right her story; on the other, I remembered arriving at my employer's studio and finding his body hanging from a rope that had been lashed around the strong wood rafters—after such a sight, who could make claims about the right way or the wrong way to survive?

"Why did you accept his collection?" I asked. "The foundation had to undertake renovations to accommodate all his books, a lot of trouble and expense for a library that was already well-appointed."

"The collection is priceless," she replied. "Many years ago he wrote the play that made him famous here. He felt he owed the foundation a great debt and debts should always be paid."

I saw the wood footstool kicked over on the striped rug, all four legs in the air; in the moment, I had thought of turtles. To my shame, I had not tried to cut him down; I had not called 911 or the police or his children. I backed out of the room and ran down the spiral staircase and out the front door, slamming it behind me like a harried teenager, straight out into the glorious blaze of summer. It was a beautiful day; the air smelled floral. For a little bit longer, my life was still my life. I ran for blocks and blocks. I only stopped an hour later, after I got a call from his daughter on my cell. *Come right away,* she had wept into the phone. *Something terrible has happened.*

I looked out the window; across the lawn, the gardener was trimming the hedges.

"It was me," I said. "I found his body. Nobody knows."

The director did not say anything back. She sat slumped in her chair, her expression flat and inscrutable, utterly disinterested in my confession; she seemed to have floated away to some other place. I left her in her office, staring down at the envelope in the center of her desk.

On the day of my departure, the story spread first at a hush, from the chattering of the kitchen staff, and then at a roar, for no one enjoys

gossiping about human tragedy more than intellectuals and artists. The director had been arrested that morning, for attempting to steal an infant. The theft had occurred at a market in the village center. Apparently Sylvie had lifted the child straight out of his bassinet while the mother was haggling over the price of porcini mushrooms. When the mother heard her child wail and chased after Sylvie, she had started to run, the baby jiggling in her arms; before long she was apprehended by the carabinieri. So she had not been liberated from her grief at all; rather, it had mutated into an underwater state, where the distinction between the living and the dead, between the debts that could be repaid and those that were bottomless, had been erased—a confusion that could turn a person monstrous.

"Her child died," I told the kitchen staff, hoping that they might take pity on her if she were ever permitted to return to the foundation. "In a drowning accident, not long before she came here."

On the train from Perugia to Rome, where my employer's children had booked me a room at a storied hotel beloved by their father, I thought about what a peculiar existence I had been leading, so consumed with enhancing the presence of another life that it had not even occurred to me to be surprised that the children had not asked where I wanted to stay; they had assumed, and not incorrectly, that I would want whatever brought me closer to him, that I had few curiosities of my own. There had been a safety in my vocation, a concealment, that I would miss and that I would have to learn to live without. How did people begin to learn to live without the things that they had loved and would miss?

Everyone, including his children, thought that we had been lovers through the years, but they were wrong. There had been one moment, early on in my tenure. I was helping him organize documents for a project and I said a word—cumulus, I think it was; I had been talking about the sky—and he removed his glasses and asked me to say the word again. I repeated "cumulus"; he touched my wrist. The slight music of my pronunciation had caught his ear because that's how he was, obsessed by the smallest details, the details that anyone else would miss. In his study I watched the dawn of shifting possibilities pass over his face and wondered if my life was about to change forever—but the moment came and went, a door swinging open

and then shut, leaving me uncertain as to whether I should never say "cumulus" again or if I should say the word every day for the rest of my life.

I kept thinking that the door might swing open some time in the future, but it never did. I suspect that I became too useful to his day-to-day life to be considered erotic. He moved on and he moved on and he moved on until a door was flung closed in his mind, one that, try as he might, he could not push open.

Then again I couldn't say how hard he tried or didn't; I had been just as shocked as everyone else by the way he had died. I began to count the stops —Assisi, Foligno, Trevi. I got off in Trevi for no reason in particular beyond the fact that the name made me think of the Trevi Fountain in Rome, which I had read about in a guidebook. I walked uphill to a café in the town center, pulling my suitcase behind me. I wondered where Sylvie was right then, sitting in a jail cell or in her own home, and what would ever become of her and the ghost of the child her imagination had birthed. I thought about the grace of finding oneself among strangers, unanchored from your own history—a refuge I had robbed her of, I will admit, though the shelter she had constructed for herself was very fragile and so it was only a matter of time. I sat down on the edge of a piazza, under a crimson awning. A waitress, a young woman with heavy eyeliner and a crooked smile, approached my table and I began to marvel at all that I could tell her.

Why Brother Stayed Away

Ann Beattie

The moment had come to see if it was true that Grumpa had a collection of ties lined with pictures of what her brother called "naughty ladies." Her brother lived in Buffalo and had not volunteered to have any involvement in cleaning up their grandparents' house. That had fallen to her and her husband. Only three ties hung on a hook inside the wardrobe. She examined the lining of the first. Weren't the women supposed to be naked, even if only from the waist up? Was Grumpa so lame that he was showing his men friends a picture of a woman wearing a scarf wrapped around her tits? Or a girl smiling over her bare shoulder from under a sunhat? The third tie was lined with a drawing of a carved pumpkin, smoking a pipe.

Her husband reached around her, opened the door of the wardrobe, and fingered Grumpa's polka-dot robe, his scuff slippers barely visible on the dark floor beneath it, and a couple of poorly hung, sagging sweaters. There were other clothes mashed together. With one finger, she separated a striped shirt from a wrinkled vest Grumpa had sometimes worn on holidays, his father's watch fob dangling an ornate, gold-filled watch, tucked inside a pocket.

In the secret shed—well; it was hardly a secret that the shed stood at the back of the property under the maple tree that had once been hit by lightning; only its contents were unknown because of the padlock. She watched with little interest as the screws were drilled out of the hinges. They fell on the ground as he walked off to do the next chore.

Call me if you find a dead body, he said. Sure, she replied, she certainly would. She stepped in. The shed was remarkably uncluttered. There was a lawn mower. A bicycle entirely missing its front tire, the back one deflated. A box. Inside the box, various tools, some of them rusty. A barbecue fork. An old issue of *Life* magazine with Richard Nixon on the cover. There was

a dead body: the rotted carcass of a squirrel, the tip of its tail still bushy, like a groomed poodle.

Received information was that Grumpa had put the cash from the sale of his business into his wife's sewing basket, but that was not to be found on any shelf, in the attic, in the shed, in the garage, or anywhere else. In the garage, however, a cedar box was found, unlocked. Inside was half a pack of Camels, a cork coaster imprinted with the words Ben Bow, a splayed toothbrush with blackened bristles that had been used for something other than brushing teeth, Murine, a bottle of solidified glue, a white pill with no marking, and a small calendar (1962) from a local gas station. Also a penny, a dime, a tin soldier about the size of her husband's thumbnail, and two buttons.

The screwdriver was required to remove the latches on a wooden box dragged out from under the bed. "Voilà!" he said, walking out. She thought the box looked too rugged to contain, for example, her grandmother's wedding dress. It contained a quilt, log cabin pattern, twin bed size, nice. There was also a second quilt, badly folded. That one was not quite equal in size, but also intended for a twin bed. There was a faint, very faint, scent of lavender that disappeared as her nose pressed into the fabric.

Twenty minutes early, the man showed up who'd bought Grumpa's "antique" Ford truck and was having it hauled away. He stood around, one hand jingling change in his pant pocket. The flatbed arrived. Some twitchy guy loaded with chains jumped out. He and his young helper, or son, or whatever he was underneath all those tattoos, got the black truck onto the flatbed in no time, and just like that, they were gone. The check had cleared the day before. The man drove away in his Saab without even waving.

In the dream she has that night, Nixon requests, by engraved invitation, her presence at the White House. Well, dreams can sometimes be like smoking perilously strong weed. Like she'd be invited to the White House! Like Nixon would send a carriage for her, pulled by prancing white horses! Cinderella, off to a fabulous evening, wearing her finest gown, the night just a bit chilly. Fuckin' Ambien, she thinks, or dreams. The quilt warms her as she bounces in the back.

(She clutches the duvet.)

Through the gates she goes! Mrs. Nixon, wearing a midcalf fur coat, waves a gloved hand. She and President Nixon approach. The driver opens her door. He offers a gloved hand. A horse snorts, raising its head.

(This is her husband, snoring.)

She steps out, her satin slipper as beautiful as Mrs. Nixon's shoes with sparkling buckles. She swirls, to delight the adults. She's a child again. She opens her cape, exposing the deep blue lining. Big mistake! The velvet's imprinted with dancing figures: long-legged showgirls, high-heeled, bare breasted, red lipsticked, one with her butt stuck out, another whose lips coquettishly kiss a rosebud.

The Nixons are flabbergasted. Then they laugh so hard they frighten the horses, who run away, the driver helpless as his carriage disappears. All smiles vanish. Nixon narrows his eyes. What to do? She can't even flee without the carriage. Imploringly, she turns to Mrs. Nixon. But she's vanished, fur coat, splendid shoes, and all. Desperately, she turns toward the president. Men in military uniforms flank him. They're everywhere, a child's soldiers grown life-sized. Go ahead then, Nixon says to one of them: that driver fellow lost his carriage. Now he's gotta be beheaded. Who's our swordsman? Or will we have to have a firing squad and so forth?

She's sputtering spit, she finds, as she awakens and wipes her fingers across her mouth. Her weight is on one hip; she's propped awkwardly on her elbow, her nightgown tangled, the duvet, as always, sliding off the bed. Her husband sleeps.

She forgets the dream until she's about to toss the *Life* magazine down on a pile of someone's recycling in the trash room that stinks of mold mingled with pine, when she looks at Nixon's jowly face. Such an awful, dishonest man. He even extended a war because it better suited his purposes. In that instant, she realizes that her husband found the money. He must have found it, and not said so. Why else be so incurious about everything from the old man's ties to the contents of the shed? "Call me if you find a dead body." All he did was drill latches and walk away.

I'm going back to take another look, he says, picking up the car keys from the hall table as she reenters the apartment. Half senile or not, your

grandmother insisted to her dying day that he'd hidden a vast sum of money in her sewing basket. It's a sewing basket I'm looking for, not a needle in a haystack. What's that look supposed to mean? Remember I'm the one who's giving up my weekends doing this, not your brother.

How Tsala Entered the Spirit World and Became a Hawk

Brandon Hobson

> *The same encroaching spirit will lead them upon other land of the Tsalagi.*
>
> —Chief Dragging Canoe, 1740–1792

COMPILER'S NOTE

Osiyo! Last year my grandfather passed away, quite suddenly, of a heart attack, and since that devastation I have begun to embark on a journey to live my life according to traditional Cherokee teachings. I had never followed these teachings before, despite my traditional Cherokee upbringing in Oklahoma, where my grandfather raised me from the time I was four until I left for college. His name was Eli Wadie Chair, and he was a full-blooded Cherokee who believed in the spirit world of the ancient Cherokee teachings. I loved him very much. He was a man who told me stories my whole life while staring at birds outside our window. A man who believed strongly in talking to wolves and hawks and in the desultory joy of watching the trees. The first time he took me to Geronimo's grave in southern Oklahoma, he quoted Geronimo, "The sun, the darkness, the winds are all listening to what we have to say," and afterward I began to think about Geronimo's life, about justice, good and evil, the dead and living. With history showing its temperament, such equivocation shouldn't be surprising. And shouldn't we all be worried about our spirits before it's too late? By too late, I mean death, of course, unless the world burns up first, or unless people are swallowed up by earthquakes, as Wodziwob the Paiute prophesied in the nineteenth century.

Traditional Cherokee belief teaches that all souls after death continue to live on as spirits, some manifested into the bodies of animals while others are unseen. My fear is dying, and dying too soon. I have no reason for such a fear except speculation for what will happen to my spirit after I die, especially as I continue to study traditional Cherokee teachings. I recently spent a smokeless night in the living room of my grandfather's house, where he died in a chair with a certain notebook open like a dead bird in his lap. The notebook contained hundreds of pages of drawings, symbols, and stories written in the Cherokee language by a man named Tsala, apparently my ancestor, whose death and after-death spiritual journey is detailed in the following selection, which I have provided with much wonder and horror.

Having at first piqued my curiosity, this notebook has become my passion. Discovering it has changed my life.

My first question upon the notebook's discovery was what does this say about my ancestor? However, as I continue to piece together Tsala's writings, the more interesting question might be What does it say about death and the spirit world? Again, I had given very little serious thought to ancient Cherokee teachings, always dismissing them as mythical, but since I have begun compiling every piece of writing I can from this notebook, having read the creation stories and spiritual stories, poems of violence and suffering and indecipherable scribblings, having seen drawings of buffaloes and birds and smoking pipes, I am left astounded at the possibilities of what can happen to the spirit. I take the notebook with me everywhere, always thinking about it. There are specific dates and names concerning the stabbings of innocent men. There are detailed references to spirits walking and spirits flying and spirits reincarnated into the bodies of animals and birds. These characters are inexhaustibly memorable. Such is the case with the story presented below, which also deals with one of the cruelest events in US history—the Trail of Tears. Many Cherokees knew this brutal event was coming and therefore prepared as much as they could, hiding their families in caves in the mountains. According to Cherokee teachings, the thirteen heavens ended in 1519 on the day Cortés landed in Mexico. Three hundred years later, in the beginning of the period we Cherokees call "the seventh hell," President Jackson ordered the removal of Native American

people from their land. (*Wado*, Prez, old fool! Did you know westward was the direction taken by the spirits of the dead?)

Of course, this was a time of betrayal and suffering and death. Are we the lost tribes of Judah? According to my grandfather's notebook, my ancestor Tsala believed so; he was one of many who hid his family in the caves to avoid leaving the land, though sadly the soldiers executed him with his son. Before his own death, my grandfather was in the middle of translating Tsala's writings, and there is still much to be translated. Is this something anthropologists, historians, writers, archaeologists, painters, and poets could use to help keep Native American heritage alive? How aware is the public of the cultural dispossession and displacement among the Cherokees and other tribes throughout history? Certain textual references to spirits and reincarnated spirits seem overwhelmingly complex, and they might actually be more sad than sapient, an apotheosis of courage and resilience. I consider everything I'm translating as indispensable to the development of the human mind. My grandfather's interest in storytelling, much like my own, led him to learn the language, and today I study the language too, on warm days when I sit outside on my back porch and blow smoke rings from his buffalo pipe. Do not assume I'm not mortified by everything I'm translating, particularly the postdeath account, the spirits walking westward, the brutality from soldiers forcing the tribes out of their land. I am learning to pay attention to the outside world. I no longer hunt animals or kill insects. I no longer fish or swat at bees or mosquitoes, not even flies. Though hunting was a profession, a Cherokee would not kill a wolf, as wolves were messengers to the spirit world. Owls, however, are considered ominous by many Cherokees. It is believed people can turn themselves into owls at night and travel around to do evil things to other people. My mother used to tell me a story about when she was a young girl walking home with her sisters at sunset and saw an owl swoop down and attack a young boy who was playing in his yard. The boy fell down screaming as the owl dug its talons into his head and face until the boy's father came out and the owl flew away. The boy lost an eye and suffered severe scars to his face.

What does it all mean? Are there in fact truths in the ancient Cherokee myths? A case could be made that there is more to the outside world than

one thinks, though I can understand too how one would see my vulnerability or state of mind as questionable. It isn't uncommon today not to follow the ancient stories in such serious contemplation. We teach these stories as myths and as part of our culture and history. Certainly I consider a ubiquitous spirit in my presence, and though I hear no voice or whisper, I remain aware. A hawk visits me from time to time, swooping down to a fence post across the yard, and I can't help but wonder if the hawk is Tsala reincarnated. His spirit lives in the hawk; he travels around my land, protects me. I wave to him and he cocks his head. I watch him circle in the sky, swoop down to claw into some field rodent, and carry it away to eat. I watch him devour it in the middle of a rocky road. Later the hawk returns to his post, perched proudly, watching me. What does it all mean?

My grandfather's spirit too must be out there somewhere. Has he risen from his grave and walked the earth, or is he soaring in the air? Is he a hawk, like Tsala, perched on some fence while his wife lies feeble and sick in bed? He once told me he had watched his father walk into the sacred fire in the northeastern Oklahoma woods and disappear, leaving no physical remains. "We are the Ani-yun' wiya," he told me. "Our cyclical reincarnation views are often misunderstood or ignored by our neighbors, but keep your eyes open! Look around you! What do you see crawling in the fields? Flying in the sky? Be kind to them; you never know who they might be."

As the following selection suggests, perhaps we should retain integrity where ethics raise questions regarding myth and history, fact and fiction, the seen and unseen. I remain hopeful. *Wado.*

—B. H. (Gonjiam Plains Hospital, Oklahoma, 2018)

* * *

ANI-YUN' WIYA

> *It is sweet to die in one's native land and be buried by the margins of one's native stream.*
>
> —Tsali, Cherokee medicine man awaiting execution, 1838

When I was a child, Dragging Canoe taught me to look to the yonder sky, where I saw visions of the dying. I saw people walking alongside oxcarts, carrying their children and their food while soldiers sat in wagons with their guns. I saw the fighting of warriors and soldiers across the land as my people hid in the bloodstained grass. I saw people dying of starvation and disease. I saw the slaughter of the fattest cattle and the passing of the war pipe while our people mourned for the dead. I saw slaughtered horses and snakes lying in the red dust at night. A deaf boy running through a field while soldiers called for him to stop; when he didn't, they shot him dead. I saw the burning of ranches and stage stations, and afterward the feasting and dancing. A wind sweeping down into a dead body and giving birth to an eagle, who flew away into a white dawn. I saw bursts of fire in the sky and bodies trailing away like smoke.

Visions, visions, visions of the dying—what did it mean for me? For my family? For my people?

My father, the medicine man, taught my brothers and me to hunt, and in those early years I hunted so often I was followed everywhere by crows and magpies. Coyotes came out of the woods and stared at me with their tongues hanging out, waiting for food. One day while hunting, my brother, Attoka, found a bear cub in the woods. There was no sign of another bear, so he approached the cub but didn't kill it. My father had taught us that our ancestors had hunted only for food, not sport, and that once an animal had been killed we should perform a ritual to the spirits for forgiveness and to explain that we needed the animal for food. Animals were not to be exploited, my father explained. This had to do with our fundamental concern for harmony, and should still be followed. The bear cub was tame at first, even before Attoka fed it corn from his hands. Then the cub turned and clawed at my brother, tearing flesh from his face that left an opening revealing his teeth and bone. When he made it home there was so much blood on his face and chest I thought he was going to die. The elders held two healing ceremonies that lasted from morning into late at night. Very late I listened to one of the elders tell me that good and bad spirits were roaming our land. He said the good ones become eagles, hawks, or birds in the sky. The bad ones turn into wolves and show their pointed teeth.

I was intrigued with the elders' stories of spirits. One day I came to a stream where a bison was drinking. I moved quietly and sat behind the bushes, pulling my bow and arrow from my sack. I did not think it was anything more than a bison, but when I looked back up at the stream, I saw a beautiful girl instead. Her hair was long and unbraided. I stood and approached her, captivated by her beauty. She smelled of prairie flowers and wild sage.

"Where is the bison?" I asked.

"Why do you question what you see?" she said, taking my hand and placing it on her face. "Can't you feel me? Who are you, young boy? Go and look at your reflection in the stream."

I went to the stream but could not see myself. I tossed a rock into the quivering water, then turned back to the girl, but she was gone. I called for her but she didn't reply. I looked up at a high tree branch and saw a spotted owl, which was watching me. Frightened, I turned and ran, carrying my sack over my shoulder. I had heard elders talk about people turning themselves into owls and doing evil things to people in the middle of the night. I was more afraid of owls than rattlesnakes. Yet I was not hurt or injured. It was at that same place where I met my wife many years later.

That area too was where I met a man from Talking Rock Creek who told me about a giant frog living near the Chestatee River who was believed to be an angry spirit returned from the grave. The spirit frog was once a hunter who witnessed the transformation of a cornstalk into a beautiful woman, fell in love with her, but died of disease from drinking from the creek, which was filled with snakes and frogs. Her drops of blood in the ground sprang into corn, which he ate so often he became fatter and fatter. I thought about those stories, about fate, life, and death. Thanks to the wisdom of Dragging Canoe, I was fascinated by a hawk that circled in the sky. A bird of prey, the large hawk (*tla' nuwa*) was never eaten. I saw the hawk as a strong, powerful creature. The hawk, as Dragging Canoe told me, was princely and contributed liberally to the support of the bald eagle.

I helped Dragging Canoe and his son take the fleshy side of enemy scalps and paint them red and tie them to poles for the scalp dances. At one of these dances one night I met a man named Dasi'giya'gi whose war

medicine was an uktena's shedded skin and burned turtle shell, which he used to smear on his face and body for protection from enemies. He had never been wounded because of wearing this war medicine. He warned me of the seventh hell we were living in, and soon I had dreams of the blood and destruction—a prophetic vision. Dragging Canoe told me: "You will be a visionary with prophetic gifts. You must learn to understand this." Tecumseh had visions too. He warned us of the soldiers coming, warned of the removal from our land, but he did not warn me of my death or, worse, of my son's death. As a child I dreamed of words written on the leaves that I could not read. I stood beside the gristmill my father built for grinding corn and watched the leaves scatter in the wind. Vision, so many visions—and why? I saw other visions too. Nun-Yunu-Wi, the Stone Man, gave me a reddish-brown rock and told me to figure out what to do with it. For three days I looked at that rock in my hands and saw nothing special about it. It was only when I saw the red on my fingertips that I knew what to do. I broke the rock and used the red color to paint my face to hunt rabbits. I was very observant and fascinated by nature as a boy. One summer I swam in Ataga-Hi, the Enchanted Lake, and caught fish with my bare hands. Cherokees believed bodies of water were ways to the underworld, and I listened to my father's family tell stories about the dangers of bodies of water whenever they visited. Many of these stories were frightening, about owls and bears, evil spirits and rattlesnakes; one in particular was told to me about the Great Leech of Tlanyusi'yi ("The Leech Place"), which is where the Valley River joins the Hiwassee. The Valley River has a rock you can walk across like a bridge to fish in the valley, but when people started fishing they began dying. They started noticing a long red leech that kept itself rolled into a ball until it sensed the presence of a human. Then it unrolled itself and leapt out of the water. Their bodies were found along the bank with their eyes and noses eaten from their faces. One person said these dead people had no tongues. This story frightened me, especially the story of a brave boy who was determined to fight the leech. He set off happily singing a song:

Tlanu' si' gune' ga digi' gage
Dakwa' nitlaste' sfi!
I will tie red leech skins
On my legs for garters!

But when he got to the rock, the water began to boil and foam, and the leech leapt up and carried him down underwater, and he was never seen again. This story was told to young people many times when the winters ended and we started swimming in streams and rivers. The question always remained in my head: was there any truth to these stories? Around this time there was also a group of little people who were believed to be spirits, the Yunwi Tsunsdi, who lived in the mountains. Some nights you could hear music and drumming coming from the caves in the mountains, which was believed to come from these spirits, as they were quite fond of music and dancing. In the time of the smallpox epidemic, a hunter in the middle of a snowy winter afternoon found small footprints leading to the mountains, which he believed were the footprints of children. Afraid that these children were freezing to death, he followed the footprints to a cave. People searched for him and thought he had been eaten by wolves or a bear, but when he returned a few weeks later, he told them he had become ill with smallpox and that the Yunwi Tsunsdi people had taken care of him until he was feeling well enough to leave. They were no taller than his waist, he said. Their hands and eyes were fire. They were night travelers and did not wish to be seen. Their teeth were crooked, but they swallowed the sun. Our people say if you hear music and drumming coming from the mountains at night, it is likely the Yunwi Tsunsdi. But we do not know why they are so secretive. Is their secretive nature to be helpful, or is there some other motive? We are not sure, but we hear them in the mountains.

Years later, in 1838, when I was a man with a wife and two children, I took my family to hide in a cave in those same mountains. We believed strongly in Tecumseh's warning of the soldiers coming to remove us from our land, and nobody wanted to leave. We were frightened but ready to defend the land. Our people would refuse to leave even though we were tricked by the government with their fraudulent treaty. We did not trust

them and knew how crucial this time would be. I told our village in the Cherokee language: *What we do will affect our people for years to come.* One of the wives hiding in the cave was so afraid for her new baby that one night she came running out into the summer rain with a tomahawk, yelling, "Kill! Kill!" I was not there, but they told me she felt the presence of a spirit's strength so powerful she threw the tomahawk into the night sky, in the rain, and it never came down again, was never found anywhere. That night it hailed large ice pellets.

Some of the men introduced us to the Christianity religion and read from the book of Matthew as it had been translated by one of the men from New Echota. We discussed peace and sacrifice. We also talked about the treaty and our humility. [*Compiler's note: I have to wonder about the reference to religion here, as the widely known "Great Spirit" could very well have resulted from the need for Native Americans to compare certain characters from ritual and creation stories to a Christian god. While many Native Americans practice Christianity today, there is no doubt an entire Native American Christianity based on creation stories/mythology is still practiced and is likely unknown to many non-native people. One has to wonder whether Tsala's stories here reflect this belief.*] Soon our children's fears passed! One night I woke to the drumming of spirits, or so I thought, and walked outside to look to the trees. The drumming stopped and I saw nothing. I thought of the Yunwi Tsunsdi living far off in the darkening lands, singing their songs and drumming, heeding a warning for all of us. *It is coming*, they would sing. I looked to the sky: there I saw the great blacksnake, the screech owl, the horned owl, and a group of people walking —they were all moving toward a giant tree in the sky. The tree was on fire and burning so fiercely I could feel the stinging in my eyes as I watched, then smoke began to cover them and the ashes fell from the sky like falling stars and I had to cover my eyes and go back inside the cave, where I lay awake until dawn. My wife said this was a strong vision of what was coming our way. All the pain and suffering. All the walking, the deaths. My wife is my guide even in moments like this, as she knew I had visions like Dragging Canoe. And the next night the soldiers arrived. The ones who swarmed on our land like a pack of wolves began firing their weapons.

Now there was a great misery upon us. The soldiers were ordered to be civil but they ignored the order and destroyed our cabins and barns. They slaughtered our chickens and hogs and cattle. They prodded our wives and elders with bayonets as they forced them out of their homes and to stockades. Many of our people had nothing but their clothes—everything else was gone. Soldiers dug into graves to steal the gold from our dead, never bothered by the stench of corpses that filled the air. Though we were safe in seclusion, two other men and I couldn't stand that we were not helping our people, so we set out. My brave son, nearly a man, came with us.

We attacked and fought, but there were too many of them. They surrounded us. One of them hit my son with a shovel and I lunged at him with my knife, cutting his arm. The other soldiers pulled me off and held me down. They tied us with rope. I told them I wanted to die before my son, but they did not agree. I closed my eyes and lowered my head as they pointed their rifles at us. I begged my son not to open his eyes, even when they told him to.

ADORNMENT AND ENTERING THE SPIRIT WORLD

> *This gift I inherited from my forefathers brings visions, prophecies. I saw a man who had been executed with his son, and I knew his spirit would become either an eagle or a hawk. He was in the third form of our ancient deities, and his name was Tsali.*
>
> —Cherokee spiritual leader, speaking of a vision, 1803

My beloved family: time among the dead is mysterious, therefore I do not understand the reason why I awoke when I did. Time among the dead may not exist at all the way humans experience it during life. Time may be felt: *u-di-tle-gi, u-hyv-dla!* (It is hot, it is cold!). My wife and daughter had adorned us in gold and jewelry and buried us. Adornment is important in death, as it is in life, and those from the Long Hair Clan made it known that we were beautiful, even absent of our spirits. In my death, in darkness, I felt the aching of my wife's suffering. In death, as we slept beneath the earth,

with the worms and the cold mud and rocks, to the soulful howl of the coyotes and the drumming of our people, as we slept beneath the feet of our people who stomped the ground and shook the heavens, I felt my wife's suffering.

So strange how I could feel her suffering as if it were my own. The suffering was so great, in fact, that I felt my spirit move restlessly in an unfathomable darkness. How long was I dead? Surely not long! I crawled out of the earth like a beast in the night, with necklaces made of bear claws and gold, with wet mud and worms matted to my hair, which hung to my chest. I crawled out of the grave and felt as strong and mighty as a horse, even though I knew I had died. I could see for miles. Most of our people were at stockades without their homes, waiting to be moved west. Our people were being forced out of our land, this I knew, but I could not understand why. My thoughts were cloudy and confused as they can be in sleep. I tried to remember my name but I fell into a strange loss of thought.

The question that seemed most apparent: for what reason did I awake?

Why did I see these visions in the night? I saw government wagons and oxcarts and soldiers with rifles. I heard the crying of children and saw our feeble elders being lifted into the wagons. I saw a flash of light across the sky. A pale mist swirled before me like a small tornado, holding the image of someone I recognized: my son, a strange vision unlike anything I had ever seen before. I wasn't able to speak or call his name, and in an instant he was gone, dissolved into the night. Across the land I heard the wailing of someone in pain.

"We are Ani-yun' wiya, the principal people!" I shouted.

But when I spoke I heard no language, no sounds of words. Instead I heard from my mouth a tiresome roar. The soldiers must not have heard me, as I was very far away. I shouted again—"Ani-yun' wiya!"—and this time not a roar or even a growl but a weary moan. Nobody seemed to hear me. I became frightened of myself, and for a moment I wondered if I had changed form or identity. As I examined myself, I saw I wore a buckskin, and I could not feel my skin. Clearly, I was a spirit of some sort. A spirit able to move, see, and speak. When I walked, my footsteps made no sound, though I felt the earth beneath my feet. I stomped my foot on the rocks and

grass and heard nothing. I tried to adjust to the elements, breathing deep. I did not hunger or thirst, but I could not recognize my surroundings. I cried out in Cherokee like a wounded dog and heard my voice trail off.

Again I was faced with the question of my identity. It seemed I could not think clearly.

Where was I?

And what was the reason for my spirit awakening?

I did not recognize my hands or my legs or my feet, though I saw myself as a strong, fierce presence. The air sharpened the sting in my eyes and I knelt down and felt the ground for dirt, which I rubbed together in my hands to create heat. I placed my palms on both eyes, and when I opened them this time I saw that I was on my own land, near the spot of my burial. Then I saw the spirits of those who had died before me, warriors, hundreds of them. I saw their sleek figures and raven-black hair and a thick, swirling dust building behind them. They wielded black and red clubs, the colors of courage and blood. They were watching me from a distance—for what reason I do not know. And I could hear them calling out:

Ayanuli Hanigi! Ayanuli Hanigi!
Walk fast! Walk fast!

In the distance I saw fires aroused from smoldering coals. I saw Dragging Canoe and his father, Chief Attakullakulla, holding their clubs. I saw the Wolf Clan warrior Five Killer and his wolf, Black Fire. I began to walk to them, but before I could reach them, a great wind came up and they transformed themselves into a flock of blackbirds and flew away. So it was that I was left alone in the night near a stream reflecting the quivering moonlight. I approached the water and leaned over to look at my reflection—my immaculate reflection! The image peering back at me in the water was not the face I had during my life, but some hazy figure whose eyes I could not see.

I stood and looked to the sky, where I saw two twinkling lights in the darkness. The question of what my purpose was for returning to earth loomed in my head and I heard the howling of a wolf across the stream and

saw that the wolf appeared to be in pain, lying on its side. I found I could walk through the stream in shallow water, though I felt no bottom to it. I crossed the water to the wolf, which howled again in pain, and I could see that the skin on the wolf's neck had been ripped off, exposing blood and bone. I knelt down to the wolf and placed my hand on the wound, which made the wolf stop howling. Then the wolf spoke:

"There is a great sadness coming on the people and this land," he said. "Your people will be forced to leave, to move west, and many will suffer and die."

I did not speak to the wolf, but he knew I did not trust him.

He said: "If you want a sign that I speak the truth, you must first throw me into the water."

"For what purpose?" I said.

"Throw me into the water and it shall be known," the wolf said.

So I did as instructed, lifting the wolf and placing him in the shallow water, where he let out a high-pitched scream, and I was afraid I'd hurt the wolf, but he told me: "Look now at my neck." And as I did so, I saw that the wound had healed. Then I stood back and the wolf came out of the water and shook his body dry.

"For this I will protect your family," he said. "For this, because you are a spirit, you should know that you can transform yourself into a creature for eternity. Now go to your family in the mountains."

The wolf started to walk off, and I shouted to him: "Wolf, how do I change my form?"

He turned his head and looked back at me: "Believe you have wings and you fly. Believe you are an animal and you roar. Believe you are dead in the mud and you sleep with the worms in the mud."

You should understand some humans are tricksters disguised as animals. Many of these tricksters are coyotes, foxes, sometimes birds. But I believed the wolf! Looking into the distance, I recognized the mountains and followed the trail leading to them. I never tired. I walked and walked. Along the way, I stopped and washed my hair in a stream. My reflection was too dark to see, even in moonlight. The water rippled. I cupped water in my hands and drank as I had done in my life. Despite the winter, the water

running down my chest and back didn't feel cold. I stood and began following the trail. As I walked I never grew fatigued—I felt as though I could walk all night. I could lift the heavy rocks around me and build barricades, shelters. The more I walked, the more my strength grew beyond anything I'd felt.

In the ground I saw wagon ruts. I saw footsteps, handprints, all leading toward the mountain, and I knew the soldiers were looking for those hiding in the caves in the mountain. I leaned down and smoothed them out with my hands. It was urgent I erase any tracks they could find. I knelt down and smoothed the dirt. I kept smoothing it and, strangely, my back was not in pain as it had once been during my lifetime. I got down on my hands and kissed the land, our land. They wouldn't steal it from us. They wouldn't, I was certain. This must've been my purpose in awakening, to keep them from pushing us out.

I remained kneeling in the dirt, crawling like a wounded dog, smoothing out the footprints and wagon ruts. My back and body remained strong. Time was unknown to me, and I kept crawling and smoothing dirt for what must've been hours without pain or fatigue. After a while I stood and saw that the sun was on the horizon and realized I had been crawling all night. I was near the mountain now, and my body felt better than it ever had, so I began to run. I ran toward the mountain as fast as I could run, and the wind in my hair felt like hands, as if I were being guided. I was not out of breath when I reached the mountain. I was still not tired, not even breathing heavy, and in the morning's dim sunlight I could now see my skin was gray, ghostly.

In the cave my daughter was sleeping, covered with blankets. I stood and watched her for a long time. I did not wake her. Soon I moved quietly toward her and knelt down. I reached out and touched her hair lightly with my hand. I was happy I could feel her hair in my fingers. I touched her back gently, then her forehead. She stirred in her sleep from my touch and, quite suddenly with her eyes still closed, swatted at my hand. I should tell you, Sonja, her hand passed right through mine! This was very disheartening for me because I knew I could touch and feel but people weren't able to touch or feel me. Perhaps this is the way of the spirits when we roam about the

earth to see our families. I can tell you that it was sad, at least in that moment, but I was happy to feel my daughter's hair and see her. Then I stood and saw my wife across the cave, stripping corn. The beautiful woman, her hair hanging down her body, facing away from me. I moved silently so I could see her face. I wanted to embrace her, but I knew she could feel me and it would disturb her forever, so I remained at a distance. I was very quiet. My feet made no sound as I sat and watched her. I thought of when we grew corn and squash, sunflowers and pumpkins, when we dressed deerskins together, when we walked at night together to be alone. Then I began to silently weep. I lay down beside my daughter and wept—for her, for my wife, for our people hiding in the mountain. I wept for the people who were beaten. I wept for the people who were already in wagons and walking west. I wept for all who were suffering and dying. I wept for my son.

I spent all day at the mountain, following them and watching them. My wife began to weep, telling our daughter about my wife's parents going west. They were too old and would not return to us, and I saw my daughter's eyes grow sad as she lowered her head. Then they went out to gather sticks with some of the others, and the men went into the woods to hunt. I stayed and watched my daughter play and all the while felt at ease knowing they were safe, at least for the time being, as the soldiers were gathering the others to migrate. I began to understand too my purpose for returning, and that this purpose had to do with justice for our people. I sat in a darkened cave and meditated the rest of the sunlight on this, and when I came out I could see the orange sun on the horizon to the west. I moved across the mountain to my wife and daughter, who were sitting with others by a small fire, eating. I heard laughter from children, the most pleasing sound.

After bidding a silent goodbye to my wife and daughter, I left the mountain and headed back to the wagons. In the morning light I ran along the trail and felt as though I were gliding with my arms spread like wings. Time—whatever time I experienced—seemed to move slowly during this run, and I had a strange and intense vision of people walking wearily through the snow. On and on they trudged, hunched forward in the wind. I

saw a storm coming from the west. I saw people falling to their knees, dying in the rain. I saw the guards with their rifles and the scowls on their faces, and I felt the misery sweep over everyone like a cold wind. I saw the terror and brutality and heard the crying of infants and children. I saw the guards with their beards whom I would soon see face-to-face, this I knew as a spirit, the men whose presence would send me spiraling into the night in a fit of anger, the ones I vowed revenge on, the ones who slept with their ugly mouths open and their white bellies uncovered, their jugs empty, their bodies drunk and freckled and light haired and stinking with sweat and evil.

I saw too the manifestations of others like me—the roaring bear in the woods; the soulful, howling coyote; the eagle circling in the endless sky—and I knew I was not alone. A curiosity came over me when I saw these things, and for a moment I felt my anger lift away in the silence of the night. I was calmed by the sounds and visions of the night as I moved forward. I thought of what I taught my children: harmony, peace. Anger is like flooding water, building and building to destruction. What do I do next? Do I wander like a free spirit or do I seek justice? I stood in silence, looking to the yonder sky as Dragging Canoe had taught me as a child.

ETERNAL SKY SPIRIT

> *I have heard that lost silence. You have not heard it because you have not been dead.*
>
> —Tenskwatana, Shawnee (1775–1836)
>
> *There is no death, only a change of worlds.*
>
> —Chief Seattle, 1854

The question as to whether I should confront the soldiers and kill the ones who executed my son and me occurred to me over and over as I neared the stockade. But I was never a violent man and could not see myself as a violent spirit. Still, I found myself walking to the stockade where the wagons were being loaded by guards. I moved quietly, knowing they would not see me, or so I thought, but when I found myself hissing the closer I got

to them, I knew they could hear me, knew my sound was threatening or at least fearful because one of the guards responded to me.

"Listen to that," one guard said to the other.

"I don't see anything," the other said, looking in my direction.

"But did you hear it?"

The second guard never responded. I wasn't sure if he was frightened or annoyed, but he walked away from the wagon and left the first guard alone. It was at this point I decided to move in closer and see whether he noticed me. He took a drink of a jug and wiped his face with a rag. For a moment he looked around to see whether anyone was watching him. Though I wanted to attack him, I knew it was not the right time; still, I moved in his direction out of the darkness until he turned and looked at me. I saw his face and knew he saw me, though he did not look frightened. I wondered if he thought I was one of our people coming to talk to him.

"Your plan is to harm us," I said to him. I heard my own voice this time, not a growl.

He stared at me, confused. He took a step to the side and gripped his rag as if trying to gather what he wanted to say.

"Say that again?" he said.

"I said your plan is to hurt us," I told him again, taking another step forward.

Vengeance is a word not to be used lightly. Vengeance is not death. It is not evil. It is not to be taken for granted or ignored. Vengeance, mixed with anger and fury, can be more harmful than good. You should understand everything about vengeance and its importance for justice, for order and harmony. This is the way we believe, the way our ancestors believed. This is our way.

The soldier shook his head, confused. It was clear he didn't understand what I was saying even though I could clearly hear my voice. As if by some curse, I felt compelled to attack and tear into his body with my hands and teeth and kill him instantly. I felt a burst of rage at the sight of him looking back at me, yet I did nothing. I did nothing because I thought of my wife, my daughter, and my son. The soldier couldn't touch me, just as my daughter was unable to touch me even though I could feel her. I was safe

because I had no body, no flesh, only spirit. My plan, therefore, changed as this guard looked at me through narrow eyes, and I could tell the longer he looked at me, the more afraid he became.

"Do you understand what you're doing to these people?" I asked him. "Do you see what's happening? Look around you, soldier."

He stepped back and spoke the name of his god. He now looked terrified as I moved closer. He saw my spirit as an anger manifested into human form. He saw my fury.

I made a noise, a moan, but he turned and fled. I knew I had frightened him, and this satisfied me. It excited me as much as the thought of killing him. The night filled with the smell of meat cooking and I thought of the many times I snared and skinned rabbits for stew, though I did not hunger, even with the strong smell. I remembered chopping wood near this place in the middle of winter when my wife was nursing my daughter. I thought of our triumphs and struggles, the pain we endured throughout cold winters. My mind filled with angry, evil thoughts about the migration, and again I considered the question What was my reason for becoming a spirit? To kill or seek justice? Or to protect you, all of you, for years to come?

My beloved: I yearned for vengeance for my son, my family, our people —and yet I turned into an ageless hawk, strong and adept, and flew westward into the night sky.

In the Great Hall of Bones

Eleni Sikelianos

The face like a magnet draws to itself
animal parts

rabbit paw

veal gut

pig light

to the eye & the skin & the tongue & the teeth
to echo the chaos of mouth

more crumpled mammal than

daylight

As when moons have moons
your kisser a satellite
to talk (a kind of traffic) attracting

words

which hover at the lip trying
to describe or define

the first plants
last elephant or
what resides deep
in the heart, daughter

if you ask
Where do hearts come from?
I'll say
your ticker too is daughter
to a turtle's who got it
off bacteria

and in turn
in the Great Hall of Bones tell me
a gibbon's skull
doesn't look like yours

I mistake your foot
for a flipper
your tongue for an ascidian
sea squirt

Whose newborn skull is that
some other you put in the window?
Human, chimp, orangutan, gorilla?

The you splits in two, pluralizing
toward a we, and we have no trouble
displaying stuffed bonobos and gibbons
but draw the line at *sapiens*. Should your mirror

self wish to compare
a flamingo's liver to a toucan's, a ray's, or a buzzard's
a fox's stomach
to an ox's bladder

elephant to a gazelle's esophagus
you've put them all here
in jars lining the walls with light
pouring through just
as it pours through the skeletons once the flesh
is removed. The rib rings what's right
in us while the eye

rings what's wrong. What's wrong? In tongues, you have

seals, panthers, black bears, hyenas
lions, anteaters, peccaries, llamas
coatis, and the black-and-white ruffed lemur of Madagascar, for starters
each in its glass flask
floating in yellow elixir. What ancient

witch’s chamber is this that houses, superstitious, a

giraffe’s rumpled *papilles du palais*, a palace
where taste no longer takes place?

You were sure a giraffe never used such a thing to talk
You said, Stay silent as a giraffe
but I once pitched my tent in savanna grass and woke
into a sea of giraffe—Did I hear their low, muttering heart-night moans
like hearing a tenderized earthquake from underground at dawn?

This is your inner oracle speaking
(soundtrack: a bear’s deep hibernation breathing):
and in the night you hear the bear
beget the bear, the fox be-
get the fox all
the social animals drink at the brook

Bird: is it a toy?
It shows us the limits
of what we can know or say

In the realm of blind pouches
(called cecum) you’ve collected
an eagle’s, pheasant’s, alpaca’s, guanaco’s

and you ascertain that a chimp's looks like a big mandrake root that will
    scream
when yanked from earth

We won't speak about what you've gathered in pancreases, lungs, gills
but among the many hearts along the northwest wall I see
a harbor porpoise
crocodile
tortoise
python

I am looking at these skeletons thinking about myself—the thin
reflection in the glass where over
the incredible architectural curve of some spine I see
my eyes are puffy from too much wine and

some you's blue
tennis shoes—
In my mind I animate
the one-eyed pig, the two-headed snake, the necessity
        to learn how to lean
into each
                other & breathe

and I am sweating a lot by now in the hall

all these organs have lost their use and color, swimming in ancient
alcohol and

I ran out of time before I could note them all, but saw

further on, a tiny little dried-up human brain looks like an overgrown
acorn

That’s how dumb you are.

A Curiosity of Spies

Greg Jackson

We signaled for another round of the past, watching from the city that used to make things. Below the ruins of a careworn industry, the spoiling frescoes of our shabby basilica, we watched. During the commercial breaks we offered our commentaries. Étienne proposed that we might understand the spies as students of our unconscious habits of self-betrayal. We considered this in silence, allowing that he took an interesting angle on things. Above us the spies reconnoitered backyards for sight lines, fallback positions, hidden matériel. We watched as they buried carbines under doghouses, incorporated disinformation into shopping lists, bugged massaranduba decks. Under the canopy of an off-brand gas station the Spy in Plaid made contact with his counterpart's estranged teenage daughter. The highway plaza whistled with emptiness, the rush of cars heading west.

We watched, we didn't just watch. We heard, we smelt, we touched and were touched. At the break Jones came on and rubbed our shoulders in a manner the focus group had found manly but affectionate—businesslike, caring. Girls in skirts and knee-highs passed outside on their way to school, and although we could no longer see or hear them from where we sat, dully transfixed, we knew they spoke to one another with the needling playfulness of girls newly awake in the chill air of a spring morning, and we sensed in this the continuity of a meaningful order.

"Is the application we have observed retaining their hair what is commonly termed an 'Alice band'?" Jacques-Charles inquired, as he is wont to do.

"It is," Antoine admitted and, emboldened by his prior remark or perhaps by the example of the spies, Étienne submitted that lacking straightforward content the language of narrative development can still arouse a sense of

entailment we find comforting. But this was too fine for us and we told him so.

Half a world away Mazzy had impregnated herself with a drugstore kit. Her reasons began in loneliness, boredom, curiosity, and unexpended love. You could be poor, it seemed, and still have nothing to spend it on. Reminded then of her poverty and the workdays she put in at the plant Mazzy was forced to reconsider her decision as rash—alarming—impractical—foolish. And still, she was excited.

The spies were experts in the "form" of life considered separately from its "content." For instance: the affective signatures of twenty-two common anxiety medications; the discrete meanings of entering an ice cream parlor at 11:00 a.m., 2:30 p.m., or 6:00 p.m.; where in descending order of likelihood to look in a stranger's house for compromising media (mortgage records, home videos, greatest-hits albums from the 1980s); the actuarial longevity of a marriage in which one or more partners has purchased a blanket with armholes. The spies, of course, were people too. This made them interesting. Like all of us they enjoyed passions, fears, difficulties in the bedroom, the oil works of Gustave Courbet, and root-beer floats.

Jones thought root-beer floats were just fine and even approved of Courbet's painting once you got past the bit about his being French. We didn't care. We hungered after his taste in spies. *The question everyone's asking. The question that has the country on the edge of its seat.* Étienne liked the Spy in Yellow, and Jacques-Charles liked the Spy in Plaid. Their civvies skewed garish but otherwise their OPSEC was pristine. It wasn't until the third episode that the Spy in Plaid caught the telltale whiff of tradecraft in the reflection of a pet-store window. The vitrine shimmered. Yellow was buying a puppy for his estranged teenage daughter. He had already seduced Plaid's wife. Plaid cut the brakes on Yellow's car while the clerk rang up the collie pup, a cerulean velvet ribbon tied festively at its throat. She would love it, the father reflected—*in voice-over*—when from nowhere a car ran him off the road and into the concrete pump station of a municipal duck pond. Plaid had played this deftly into an arpeggiation of broken ribs, a Chiclet pouch of deracinated premolars. We did not approve of their methods but we recognized the difficult conditions under which we

asked them to work, the greater purpose after which they labored, and we forgave them.

The life of a spy we understood was made painful by the obligation to enact ignorance in the face of knowledge. Our lives were made painful under similar circumstances. How were we to acknowledge all the luminous, pointless things we felt in a given day? The mass of human sentiment builds up like plaque. A spy dissimulates ignorance until his information becomes actionable, then he makes his small play. Some information never becomes actionable and is useful only in informing the quality of ignorance he feigns. We were learning things, we felt, one trip wire, one hidden listening device at a time. The spies were not different from us, awareness raised simply to the level of an art. *The pathos of their lives was unmistakable.* The pathos of their lives was unmistakable because their lives were exhaustively broadcast. Mood music taught us the fugitive shades in their quiet nobility, the fidelity they exhibited as restraint, encountering each other below the gray exurban skies to watch their daughters' evening soccer games as Barry (weekend watercolorist, claims adjuster, "Barry of Barry-and-Tina, Barry") and Roberto (Samson Electrical Subcontracting, choral tenor at Remnant Family Worship).

In that we understood what we knew of the spies as "covers" we did not take their identities to be windows on the soul. Academics argued that it was this precisely that characterized the "social death" intrinsic to celebrity espionage. Barry, we said, Roberto, we said. But they were not Barry and Roberto. They were the Spy in Yellow and the Spy in Plaid. They were the advantages that as outward signals Barry and Roberto offered when made to agree with all the things Barry and Roberto had previously been. The ghosts of girls passed by on their way to school. We had once built those schools, laid the dull yellow brick, and later interred the structures in cinder blocks to house the by-product of our pleasure. We had once built the snaking silver roads that ran like ribbons through the wild country. And earlier still we built the fort on the shores of Lac Sainte Claire, the three of us, Étienne, Jacques-Charles, and Antoine. Deprived of any future we return again and again to the past. We dwell within it. The ramshackle dome in the ceiling drips and we remember: sons and fathers constellated in their attitude of

stern love. Evening pipe smoke joining with the rigid cadence of burnt leaves. The way our daughters passing in the morning spoke to one another of things about which we could not know or care, and that we did not confuse for innocence or history.

Jones may have preferred the Spy in Plaid, he may have preferred the other. It did not signify. His task was to wait until opinion coalesced into a pollable substance at which point he would make clay figurines out of that substance all of whom in the end he would call Jones. He reckoned there were enough clay figures now to reconstitute the funerary army of Qin Shi Huang. This he thought with the self-approving bitterness of a man in a fine suit drinking scotch by the bay. The facts substantiated him. He was such a man. The bay shone with lucid seams in the afternoon light. At the approved distance, like shiftless libertines in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a security detail lounged in otiose postures on the rocks.

The bay looked gorgeous, drillable. Jones was fleeing another of McCrery's low, prescriptive litanies. He should never have gotten mixed up with the party boss, he knew, but you couldn't easily turn the man down. The guy could sell pasta molds to a celiac, they said. 3-D printers to an animist. It would be one more mistake in Jones's long, slow descent into an irrelevant and extraordinary power. The people went just *crazy* for his touch. What could he do? "Like Casanova with those mitts!" With this asseveration in the congressional locker room the committee chair had approached him. Their last candidate, Gavras, had fallen out. "Defenestrated right through the Overton window," McCrery confided. He palpated Jones's teeth like a gift horse's. "Plus the name was too ethnic."

No, you didn't easily turn the party boss down. McCrery clapped Jones on the shoulder. He would be glad to know the PIs hadn't dug up anything they couldn't bury. The Quinceañera? *Forget about it.* But they needed Jones behind Chan's caucus on UOP.

"You had me investigated?" Jones said, feeling not exactly hurt but sensing something like the hidden revolutions of a secret planet inside our own. "I heard unmanned-officer was a fiasco anyway. What about Suriname?"

"We don't think Suriname will be missed," McCrery said candidly.

And then it was one-two-three, chop-chop getting Jones together with his team, Jasmine Pierna-Schatz and "Aw, shucks" Jerzy Deitch. Jerzy had the pedigree, sure, had done nat-sec for McCullah, worked with Pitsiladis on Defense Appropriations before Bar-Yosef swapped him with Corbett for Ruvolo on Permanent Investigations, thanks to his background with Chan on the select committee, of course, real dark-side weeds, they said, OLC-memo playbook, kangaroo tribunals and misplaced pallets of cash, signature strikes that looked like John Hancock with the DTs. True ends-justified funny business, Cowboy and Indians deontology, but a team player, they said, willing to fall on the sword, eat dirt, and not above dropping off your dry cleaning on his way to disappearing videos. Now with Jasmine nodding at his side Jerzy told Jones, "Say peace when you mean war and security when you mean peace, war when you mean defense and defense when you mean war, freedom when you mean guns, guns when you mean liberty, liberty when you mean box store, and freedom when you mean '*What* polar bear?' Seem to mean things instead of meaning them."

"I thought you were policy," said Jones. "She was communication."

The aides broke into extravagant laughter.

"That's good," Jasmine said, wiping her eyes. "Remember, politics is wish fulfillment."

"I thought that was porn," said Jones.

"Remember, politics is porn," said Jasmine.

And you could only touch the people if you believed the way they wanted to be touched coincided with the autoerotic exercise of your own power. The machines were sensitive and could as easily pick up an inguinal readjustment as an unfortunate, delighted scream. You had to caress with conviction—the courage of your eventual legal conviction. Nowhere outside foreign-language textbooks did you encounter the technical term anymore, which had the quaint flavor of a démodé futurism heard in chronometer, phonograph, facsimile machine, computer. It was the toucher, the tickler. *El Molestar* in Spanish. And although Jasmine looked only negligibly older than Jones's estranged teenage daughter, Jones felt, with a swell of nobility at the thought, that he would throw away everything he had worked for to touch, tickle, or otherwise disturb Jasmine in a manner

appropriate to their self-understanding as weak yet redeemable creatures freighted with human dignity. In the Act Three resolution to which he quickly brought this fantasy around, Jones reunited with his estranged teenage daughter who discovered in Jasmine the sister she had never had and found herself disposed to reconsider Jones in the florid light of his claim on Jasmine's estimable affection.

"I just look young," Jasmine said. "It's all EGF agonists and DNA-repair enzymes. Bohr-effect exploitation, that kind of thing. I'm actually twenty-four."

That explained the lotions.

In the factory where the lotions were made the products no longer gleamed. The gleam was now added at a different factory. This was spin-off technology from a proprietary military application based in micrometer refraction indices and cutting-edge behavioral psych. Wars, we understood, were won and lost along three decisive axes: market saturation, brand resonance, and rifles. The APA appended a loopy signature to the dotted line. Mazzy added her component to the product 317 times during the quality-control interval—today between 2:45 and 3:45 p.m.—above the 300x minimum threshold but below her 350x target. She was now symptomatically pregnant and her tumid belly coincided with the conveyor-belt platform. Working at an angle to reach the streaming product she attached fifty components from the left, fifty from the right, and so on in this manner, alternating.

A month before she had been capable of four hundred attachments in an especially expeditious hour. Her supervisor, Mr. Beulah, nodded crisply. When Mazzy felt his favor descend on her she could only recognize the warmth passing through her as the echo of a lost season of youth. Sometimes she dreamed of Mr. Beulah caressing her swollen belly and shushing her when she worried—a dream complicated by arrant dislike. When in her youth had she even felt that warm liquid and indefinite hope that smelt like rotting cherry blossoms milked underfoot against the paved allée of a city park? Mr. Beulah was always on about robots anyway. Robots, he said, would take their jobs.

“Robot,” Mazzy said. “From the German *arbeit*, ‘to work,’ an early twentieth-century coinage—or bastardization—courtesy of the Czech surrealist playwright Karel Čapek.”

“Have you read much Čapek?” Mr. Beulah asked.

“Not since college,” Mazzy admitted, blushing.

In their realm the gods were placing bets. With Suriname gone the good money had moved to Gabon. The short position gave it six weeks. The election was right around the corner, after all. Gods of war, possessed of insider knowledge, were legally enjoined from participating but, well, Chinese walls are thin, information seeps through an organization like sacrificial blood on a paper napkin—in short, you could spot messenger gods laying out treasure at the OTB morning, noon, and night. Certain deities, destroyers of worlds, thought the humans just didn’t do it right, had no sense for the *grande geste*. “Couldn’t knock a charm out of superposition,” etc. Long past were the days of kenosis and satori, the life of Riley when it was nymphs and ambrosia on a rotating diner display, grab-ass by the brook with your entourage of golden youths.

The gods were too old for all that, retirees and pensioners these days. They took antidepressants for their mood and ED pills for their antidepressants. The solvency of their benefit plans preoccupied them. The new look of the pantheon upset them. They didn’t *like* calling the demigods “differently immortal.” Considered against the advantage of accumulated capital, some pointed out, this concession amounted to a square pyramid of garbanzos. Children on rafts floated in the tides and trade winds of an aleatory sea. The gods had nothing left, they often felt, but the old prerogatives of their idle voyeurism, the uncertain human story with its trying repetition and inadvertent comedy.

And here was the thing about *Suburban Spy*: you could never stop watching. You could never let your guard down because an entire season might hinge on one blown cover, one unconscious self-betrayal. In this way it was a gauge of our tolerance for vigilance, exposure, and deceit. It flattered our insatiable desire to be in the know, to spy on the spies, mundane as their lives truly were. *We pitied them the loss of privacy.* We pitied them the loss of privacy even as it comforted us that at the root of

spying was the implicit suggestion that what you did bore watching. We had no real interest in returning to the way things had been, even as we kept signaling for more rounds, frothing, bitter with the prick of homecoming, as the ectoplasm of girls passed outside, the boys with their red Radio Flyers, cap guns, Buck Rogers comic books, and Indian headdresses. Guttersnipes in the inglenooks of our dripping temple skirmished for crumbs. We heard them rustling. Pontiac with his parsonic basswood dignity basked in the reptilian light of Season Three returning from the break. In this episode Plaid was taking night-school classes toward his DDS, which he hoped to finish in time to perform the maxillofacial surgery on Yellow, who convalesced slowly, nursed by Tina and, more discreetly, Plaid's wife.

It was turning out to be a very good season.

And it was indisputable that the tickler, toucher, or whatever you cared to call it at the end of the day in the consecrated self-determinism of your private American home had changed everything about how elections were lost and won. Once we had voted for the candidate who after months of defamatory half-truths seemed marginally less odious. That was back when slander mattered. Now all that mattered was how you touched a faceless sea of strangers aware that you were touching a million others as you touched them and that you touched them in the way they had told you they liked to be touched not out of care or respect for the psychophysical particulars of their pleasure but out of consideration for your own status, career, thread counts, and the mortgages on your seven ranches. And knowing this they still wanted to be touched that way, seduced into believing the stroke was genuine, attentive, and earnest, aware of each, individually, cold, alone.

Perhaps because Jones was in love with Jasmine, because he dreamed of touching her while he stroked the people, because her skill at encouraging this transference meant that as he spoke, rubbed, and emoted he was aware only of her, the people felt the memory of a near-forgotten truth in the way he touched them, hair stood up on their arms and necks, and their spines tingled at the delicate brush of an authenticity they knew to be manufactured but that so perfectly counterfeited the bunching emotions of longing and love they had no interest in doubting it.

“You’ve touched the people, boyo!” McCrery slapped Jones rather too hard on the back. “We want *you* to be the caress of the party.”

“What do I say. It’s an incredible—”

“Say you’ll back Chan.”

Jones made a show of considering this. “The union’ll screw us.”

“The union doesn’t stand an eight ball’s chance in purgatory,” McCrery said candidly.

And then it was time to run Jones up the flagpole and see who saluted. The hill weltered with ants, the red and the black, each capable of carrying fifty times its own bodyweight in sycophancy and outrage. One nation, two party, third fail, fourth estate, fifth column, Fad #6 sherry. Shall I continue? The value of a secret lies in how closely it’s held. But its value is only realized in the moment it’s shared. This is the paradox of secrets, which haunts the waking days and sleepless nights of all who traffic in them. No matter, there will be no secrets soon. Only dramatic ironies. *Suburban Spy* has taught us this. Secrets will live in full view, drowned out by nothing more than the flashes and crackles that promise never to stop breaking over our synapses and dopamine pickups, our stimulant-starved attention. Reveal enough of them and people start to see: the secret is boring; it’s the *secrecy* that’s interesting.

Yes, we are grateful for the reduced hours. Work turned out to be a major impediment to keeping up with our two dozen favorite shows. But we did not expect to feel bereft of the punishing labor about which we had always complained, whose purpose had never seemed our own, nor to find that the leisure we so long coveted was a kind of torture punctuated by nothing else. We did not just want better, faster, easier, it turned out; not just more pleasing, more gratifying, more immediate, *more*. We wanted older, slower, harder, more annoying; we wanted withheld love and deferred joy, responsibility, anger, and pain. We wanted to tell the spies: *Stop*. Stop! Do you not see? You have a massaranduba deck! A backyard with a doghouse that houses an agreeable Shetland collie. You have rec-league basketball on Tuesday evenings. Go to your daughters’ soccer games, for Christ’s sake, make love to your wife. Repair your estrangements and live unbothered by the stirring carnality and happiness on the far side of your neighbor’s fence,

a sound like the click of a chamber filling, the reverberant echo of your own loneliness, and the conviction that out there somewhere a plot is being hatched against you.

Then a woman meteorologist petted the weather report on our foreheads, and we laughed because it tickled.

It's true, the gods lost interest.

"I've totally tuned out. For a while it was pretty good. But now it's just getting worse and worse."

"They keep recycling the same plots. It's like they never studied history."

"It's not on the curriculum anymore. It's called 'Business Precedent' now."

"Well, it's derivative is all I know. Sequel, prequel, reboot, preboot."

"But what do I expect of myself after a day of work? It's like there's this crap or—what? Go back to watching chemical reactions, animal migrations? *Supernovae?*"

"We've become spoiled. We lost our curiosity."

"Our attention span isn't— Wait, did you hear my phone?"

"Sometimes I wish we'd never cobbled the little cretins out of clay, let the ray of light impart the soul …"

"Hey! Your creation myth, not mine. I wash my hands."

And with Ganesha trumpeting for them to pipe down, and Jones standing before an empty auditorium addressing an array of sensors set to measure light frequencies and amplitudes, the vibrancies of suspended molecules, particulate matter in the air up to one part in ten million, texture, firmness of touch, and coordinates in four dimensions, he spoke. "We find ourselves in a historic moment. A crossroads. A time when we are asked to reflect, to look into our hearts, and to make a choice between our friends and our enemies. We must interrogate our conscience," he said. "But just a little. Briefly! A first impression is *plenty*. Take Gabon." Jones rubbed our shoulders in a way that expressed care and compassion but was in no sense inappropriate, or gay. "I am proud to announce that earlier this morning our Unmanned Officer Program liberated the people of Gabon from the oppression of not being our friends." Jones grinned toothsomely. "We have

also, in the process, freed Gabon from material contiguity with Africa," he added sotto voce.

The rubbing and tickling felt good. It tickled, and then it scratched where it tickled, and we smiled and laughed at the feeling of the tickling starting and stopping. Jasmine watched from stage right. Jones was saying such beautiful things, about friendship and happiness, that she gave in briefly to her desire to believe. "We believe in happiness," he was saying. "We believe there is no cost too great for happiness!"

In a wood-paneled study after the speech McCrery handed Jones a snifter of brandy and a cigar the size of an airship, and soon the room was filled with the fragrant, reminiscent smoke. McCrery said he had done good, *Damn fine*, and the old man's eyes glistened in a way that told Jones that even in the depths of convenience and venality there were shades and shimmers of pride that referenced the affective biology of procreation. "How do the numbers look?" Jones said, the brandy-borne emotion threatening to slip the banks of his more politic restraint. "Oh," McCrery shooed him away, "who cares? We make up the numbers, right?" And as the grizzled pol began thumbing through his favorite stories from a long career in these same trenches, Jones let his imagination wander to his own favorite story, the one where he escaped with Jasmine to a far-off land where life was simpler. In this far-off land Mazzy was out of a job. She had missed three days' work due to complications in her pregnancy, and meantime the lines outside the factory had only lengthened, and the robots, back-propagating the lessons of experience through their complexifying brains, had only gotten smarter. Jones knew nothing of Mazzy, but if he ever made it to this land where he thought life was simpler, he might nudge Jasmine and say, Look at that woman and her girl, look how happy they are together, conjecturing about the resemblances of the clouds above. Look at the very simple things one needs for happiness and how horribly and needlessly we have complicated our lives. Then Jones and Jasmine would have couples' massages, face masks made of China clay, ang dtray-meuk, jackfruit daiquiris, air-conditioning, silk nightgowns, running water, hot water, indoor plumbing, electricity, Wi-Fi, bottled water, imported cigarettes and liquor, lace underwear, oral contraceptives, federally insured bank deposits,

credit cards, responsive embassy and consular services, international calling plans, reliable civic institutions, savings and retirement accounts whose managers made healthy 7 and 8 percent annualized returns thanks to investment in the now-automated factory where Mazzy once worked and the resale of its gutted parent company after a leveraged buyout by P.E.

But this was only Jones's dream of "getting away from it all."

And because he had lost track of what McCrery was saying and a silence had settled in the room Jones asked, What about the whole *Suburban Spy* thing, how was he supposed to pick a side when they didn't know who would win? The party chief looked at him, puzzled. As Jones was of course aware, he said, *Suburban Spy* was a 501(c)(4) established to acculturate the public to the postprivacy era. It's like a commercial, he explained, only more confusing. You never knew who might be watching you, what small misstep, inadvertent utterance, or misjudged email might be your undoing. Better to get used to it. Soon the only privacy left would be the lonely, unuttered secrets of the mind, and even those would go one day. McCrery winked.

The news crawled ant-like across the bottom of the screen.

"Gabon is sinking," Jones reported.

McCrery nodded. "The algorithm turned out to be a war crime."

"What do we do now?"

The chief wriggled his fingers in a tickling motion in the air and the two men broke into extravagant laughter.

The night wore on. They got drunker and drunker and Jones felt safer and safer, although who knew whether this was not one more test? Who knew whether the wood-paneled room was not bugged, whether McCrery's brandy was not apple juice, or amobarbital, and his cigar an advanced polygraph device? Who knew when McCrery said, "Remember what it was like to toss the ball in the park with your old pop?," tears lighting the old man's eyes, whether this was not a crucible to gauge Jones's own susceptibility to sentiment, nostalgia, the softness of the body, the impermanence of the flesh? Remember Aerobies, we might have said, Polaroids, kites, spy scopes that peek around corners, Van de Graaff generators, fondue, crystal radio sets, punch cards, American Girl dolls,

Speak & Spell, Patriot Missiles, Tang and tape decks, Fat Elvis, glasnost, Mothra and postpunk, Bo Jackson, analog everything, lossy data transmission, Tiananmen Square, Rainforest Crunch, the first Dream Team, the ozone, Eritrean independence, the Académie française, deconstruction, dynamos, tree houses?

We remember. Étienne, the Order of Saint Louis pendant on his neck, is so besotted with yesterday he has fallen off his stool. Jacques-Charles suffocates beneath the rotting tides of the past, a tattoo the Miami gave him for courage glistening with sweat in the weak light. Antoine de la Motte cries out for the phantom girls and boys who pass, who may be our sons and daughters but whom we have estranged in holding on to things that have no meaning for them, values that no longer obtain, worlds that are dead and dying, in holding on to them in moments when love may be letting go. It has grown dark. At this late hour we are past the help of theurgy or Antabuse. We signal for another round and say tomorrow we will start anew. Agnotology promises not just confusion but relief in the form of our assured ignorance. If we squint, we see the gleaming things we used to make roll majestically off the line. A mere glimmer in the heat haze of the past. We reach out a hand for them, remembering …

But we can only remember for so long because the show is back on, the Spy in Plaid slipping the surgical mask over his face, running the drill, the water syringe, the high-volume oral evacuation system in a preoperative test. The Spy in Yellow's estranged teenage daughter has disguised herself as his assistant in a blond wig, cosmetic contacts, a thin latex mask. She is not his daughter, it seems, not estranged. She is a cutout, an asset. Everyone is an asset. The Spy in Plaid may know this; he may not. But we are too smart to miss the cameras in the ceiling fixtures, disguised as pine cones in the trees, the boom men and grips posed as civilians. We see all of it. And still the layers may go deeper. They may be *decoy* cameramen, grips, and assistant DPs. The layers may go deeper still. So deep that when we pull every last one back there is finally nothing left, the whole of it a system of no more than internal and self-consistent logic, which is to say of madness, or both. The spies, one recumbent, one poised to do him oral harm, regard each other. Music strains for the bittersweet horizon of everything we lose

just going about the day … “To think,” says Barry, “that I have wasted years of my life on a spy who was not even my enemy.” He had wanted to study literature once, Proust, before the agency, Tehran, before Beirut, East Berlin, Somalia, Loudoun County, before desk work, reorgs., thirty-five pounds in Panera Bread pastries, his dwindling friends, before the night sweats, Tina’s menopause, nervous disorders, fear of loud noises, large spaces, people, aloneness, house cats, photographs, quiet—

Plastics

Julianna Baggott

POST-AMERICAN EMPIRE, PANAMA CITY, FLORIDA

We harvest blue. This is our lot. The penned yard, straight up to our trailer. It's mostly caps that were once screwed onto bottles.

Red is our neighbor's lot. They're richer than we are. The man and woman who live there had enough money to buy a low-end fake baby. It has a blurred face and its fingers are all attached to each other, and they can't move as individuals on a single unit. Its cry is very real, so real it sometimes wails in the middle of the night, and the man will carry it and pace along his lot outside, in the near dark, and shush it.

Green is on the other side. There's only an old man in that trailer. He doesn't speak to anyone and no one speaks to him.

But what I want to get at is this: my mother and Luck and what the storm kicked up.

I knew the storm was coming. The sky was stirred up and the caps were rattling in the breeze, ticking against each other like death beetles. Our blue was knee-deep, which was good for that time of the season. I knew the storm would set us back, but it might also kick up something good from the gulf's pit-stomach, if we could survive it.

I walked down to the shore as fast as I could that morning. I wasn't the only one nervous about the sky. The shore was full of pickers, each of us dipping and bobbing as we sorted through plastics, then stopped to look up while the clouds got sooty and dark. Then we'd put our heads down again to scan and dip and bob.

That morning, I found red lipstick on the lip of a bottle and I held it for a moment and I imagined the mouth, the lipstick, the world this bottle came

from. This would happen from time to time—these traces of where it all came from—and it made my head feel airy with curiosity. It's a job, picking up all the blue bottle caps, but it was these rare finds—ones that I was only allowed to hold for a moment—that kept me going. *You never know what you might find out there*, my mother would always say.

I was holding this bottle with its lipstick mark when I felt it—the shiver that tells me: this is the moment before. *Just* before. I felt this kind of shiver just before my father left us. He'd gotten called up to be a barter man and started heading in for the sale of our goods. He wasn't allowed in the cab of the truck, but he could cling to the wire cage on the truck bed that kept all of our harvests sorted into mesh bags. There were six men, clinging to the truck. And when they came back at night, they sat inside the empty wire cage on the truck bed. And when he walked into the trailer, he smelled like the refinery—burnt and chemically sweet.

Then, one time when he was gone, I felt this shiver inside of me all day long, and when the truck came back, there were only five men. He was gone.

And my mother told me he'd come back. "He's just trying to make a better life for us. When it's ready, he'll let us know."

I'm now fifteen and my father hasn't come back. It's been just Teardrop, my mother, and me for three years. And my mother is sick—fever, headache, a gnawing in the bones of her foot. She is a small woman and she has gotten very puny, thin and frail.

The morning before the storm, I dropped the bottle with its lipstick mark. I felt the shiver, and it felt Lucky. My bag was almost full and I stood up straight and tall. Then I saw it—a fresh-dead gull. I knew it was fresh-dead because the shoreline was swarming with pickers and no one else was on it yet. To make sure, I put my fingers to the downy feathers on its chest and it was still warm. I was worried about the Luck. It might be too much too soon, wasted on a gull and none left for my sick mother, none left for us to survive the storm.

Or I thought it might be a Mark of Luck—one that would be lasting, that might save us all.

Either way, I couldn't turn away from Luck. That would be disrespectful and damning.

I fitted the gull under my shirt and walked straight home, hunched over it so no one would know.

When I got to our lot—bag on my back and a fresh-dead gull under my shirt—the old man from the Green Lot was staring blankly out of his door, the busted screen rippling. He didn't ever look at me at all and this was no different, which was good. I ran up the path between blues and greens to our trailer door.

The gull's feathers were soft against my stomach's skin.

Inside the trailer, my mother was twisted in her sheet. A child's sheet decorated with fire engines. And she'd gotten nearly as small as a child. I seemed big and lumbering beside her. The fire-engine sheet wasn't ours. We found it here when we arrived. See, this wasn't always our trailer. My father had to request our lot from the plant, and, after a few years of casting around, this was granted. My mother was pregnant with me so we were Lucky.

See, plastics and what swarmed among it all weren't good for any of us, it turned out. The Sperms went sluggish as if the plastics settled into their casings and made them stiff and aged. Their tails were heavy and they flicked slowly with little propulsion. Sometimes instead of shooting forward, they rolled in lazy circles.

And the Eggs were no better off. They thickened and wobbled. They didn't seem to know what to do anymore. They lost all sense of timing and forgot to embed.

This is how my mother explained it to me.

And the DNA was agitated—stuttering then skipping ahead. If a baby was Lucky enough to be born, it was lacking in other things. One of the legs of an X chromosome might not exist at all. "Imagine a one-legged table, toppling over," my mother said, and I tried but I never quite understood.

I'm good. I'm OK. I don't know what I would have been, but I wonder.

That's how the fake babies came about. They're made of the babies that don't make it and of plastics—they're recycled babies. They don't grow

exactly—not quite right. But you also don't need to feed them regularly either. They stay babies for longer than real babies would. And they likely won't fully grow into adults. But that's OK because we're not all going to survive anyway, at any point. Nothing's got a warranty.

When we moved in, the trailer was full of things that weren't ours. My mother told me that she decided that a child or two had lived here before and a few women. No men. We don't know what happened to any of them. There was no blue in their lot when my parents arrived. None at all.

I put the gull in the small sink and knelt next to my mother, who was on the built-in sofa. She was hot and suffering. I had a few pills for pain, but both of us decided that we should be spare with them. Hold them in case of a painful death. I helped her sit up, and I put a water cup to her lips. She sipped a little.

"Where's Teardrop?" I asked, but she was too tired to answer. I spotted him pulled up into his shell, not far from his water dish. Teardrop is called Teardrop because, when I found him, his shell was caught in a plastic six-pack ring. He'd continued growing around it and so his shell will never be perfectly oval. His is teardrop shaped.

"I found a gull," I told my mother and Teardrop. "I'll cook it. It'll taste good, I promise." My mother hadn't had an appetite for many days, but still I thought she'd perk up for a fresh-dead gull. And she did make this small little noise in her throat—a sweet hum.

"How was she today?" I asked Teardrop. "Did you hole up in your shell or did you keep an eye on her?" I looked over at him, a sharp, angry look. And I could see one of his shiny, wet eyes looking at me. And it melted me. My tone was angry and I knew it. "Sorry," I said to Teardrop.

It was quiet for a while. I didn't expect anyone to speak. I was used to quiet.

But then my mother reached out and I took her hand. She looked at me, squinting as if I were very, very far away. Her eyes were glassy. "Be sure to get every bit out. All of it."

She meant the contents of the gull's stomach. This was what killed the gulls, blockages. "I will."

As the wind grew strong and the trailer shuddered, I boiled water, soaked the gull, pulled its feathers. I opened its stomach, bloated with bits. I listed the items aloud to Teardrop, "A pen cap, a bit of mesh netting, candy wrappers, a bobbin, caps—two red, one green, no blue—the small head of a doll." It was all bright and densely packed. A small cosmos. A failed ecosystem. "Do you think we're all doomed?" I asked Teardrop.

His head was slightly out of his shell and I could tell he was worried—about the storm, about my mother, maybe the contents of the gull's stomach, and being doomed. It was hard to tell with Teardrop.

"Let's say a few words." I bowed my head. "We're sorry for this loss. We're thankful for Luck."

That was that.

I prepared the gull for the pan and began cooking it.

The trailer smelled of propane and the meat starting to take heat. My mother moaned and kicked in her dreams. The sky broke and the rain pounded down on the roof. The short trees kicked. It grew darker and darker though still day. The lightning was bright and searing. The thunder got louder, clapping overhead and shaking the air. Sharp winds battered us and everything trembled. Teardrop's shell rocked against the flooring. I picked him up and sat on the pallet that I'd set up next to my mother on the sofa, holding him close.

I sang a bit to Teardrop and my mother—who loved my singing—and to the storm itself. I sang to our harvest too. I wanted it to want to stay put in the storm. I wanted it to feel at home with us.

When the gull was fully cooked, I pulled some meat for my mother, but she wouldn't wake. I mashed some meat into Teardrop's mash and set it outside of his shell. He poked out and nibbled.

I ate some myself, quickly, as if it could all be taken away.

I looked out on our lot. The rains weighted the caps. Water puddled then pooled.

Night descended.

I tried to sleep but was fitful and restless. I was terrified of what might happen next, and, sometimes, overcome with the need to know, I would get up and throw on the floodlight to check on our lot. The caps were kicked up

by the wind. They were rising with the water and scattering. Some of red's lot was in ours. And ours was mostly in green's.

I kept an ever-watchful eye on my mother, waiting for the fever to break. It didn't. She tried to get up to go to the bathroom, but she said that the pain was now gnawing her hip. I fitted myself under her arm. "I'll get you there," I said.

But she said, "No, get me the pan." And she peed in the pan. I helped her situate and clean up and lie back down.

I tipped the pee pan into the toilet.

And just then the wind died down for a moment so I stood still and listened. And I heard the fake baby from Red Lot crying. It lasted only a moment. But in that moment, I was sure that the fake baby was as real as any real living being. I was sure that the fake baby was part of me. It was like the fake baby was my own cry—sent out of my body and voiced by its little lungs and throat and mouth hole.

And I wasn't just my father's Lucky lazy sperm and my mother's Lucky wobbly egg and my DNA, stuttered and toppled.

I was as blur-made as the fake baby. I was part of everything else and everything else was part of me—or it had been, at some point, or it would be, at some point.

And I was Teardrop—in his shell. And I was my father—wherever he was.

I was the old man and the fake baby and the fake baby's parents.

I was the storm.

And I was my mother—as her body was dying—because something in me was dying with her.

And I was already dead a little because I was the gull.

And they were all me.

For that moment.

Then the wind roared in again. And the thought was consumed by noise. Eaten.

It was all wind and storm and thunder and the rattling of the trailer and the gusting of things pitching wildly around in our lots.

I moved to the window in the front of the trailer and looked out. I saw the old man. He was whipped by the wind, soaking wet. But he just stood there, as if asking the storm to carry him away.

In the dead middle of the night, the electricity failed. I said, "It's OK, Teardrop. It's OK. We expected this."

I put Teardrop on my chest. His weight felt good. I held him. I said, "It'll pass. And we won't lose our whole harvest. We won't. And storms sometimes kick up more things from the gulf's pit-stomach. And we might do OK, all things considered. Are you listening? Do you hear me?"

But then, an hour later, my mother's breath went shallow. I settled Teardrop on my pallet and propped a flashlight in the corner of the sofa so I could see her. Thin faced. Her eyes were closed but not all the way and so I could see her wet blue irises darting under the lids. I put my hand on her stomach, then to her burning cheek. Her eyes kept flitting, mad as moth wings. I shivered then too, but who wouldn't?

"I'm getting the medicine!" I was loud because the storm was loud. "I'll put it in your mouth. You won't be in pain." But, in truth, I knew she couldn't really hear me. She wouldn't be able to take the medicine. It was too late. "Mama," I said. "Mama, you're going to be OK. You just need to burn through the fever to the other side."

And then she stopped breathing.

I put my hand on her chest. She took a rattled breath in and out.

Then nothing again.

Then another breath.

And quiet.

"Keep breathing," I said to her. "In and out. Keeping going. Please."

The storm was giving up, going quiet. The rain was lighter. The lightning had passed.

She took a few more breaths with long lulls and then finally the lull went on and on and on. And I knew she'd taken her last.

"No," I said. "No, don't go." I was shivering hard now, inside and out. "Teardrop," I said, "we can't let her go!" I rubbed her arms and her legs, her hands and feet. I knew she would grow cold, and I wasn't ready for that.

Morning light tilted in the windows. And I was tired. My body was slack. I put my head on her chest.

"Teardrop," I said, "she has left us and we're alone."

I picked up Teardrop and went outside. It was quiet, windless. Our lot was wrecked. Our harvest was just a scrim of floating blue caps. The rest had been washed away, scattered and blurred with green and blue and bags and straws and buckets and the whole lot of it. Plus, the limbs and brush from the short trees and the parts of our trailers that were ripped clean off.

The old man wasn't in his yard and he wasn't looking out from his door.

The man from the Red Lot—with the fake baby strapped to his back—was gathering their caps. The woman was using a rake, making piles and picking through them.

But I couldn't tend to my own lot. I had to take my mother to the bury-man.

And I had to do it fast or someone might find all my strewn blue caps and, if that someone was allowed to also collect blue caps, I could lose my whole season. Or a poacher could come and take it all and sell it on the unseen markets.

The bury-man lived out beyond the tarp fields. But I didn't want to leave Teardrop, not alone, not now, after everything. In times of trouble, people could get excited and loot a trailer they thought was empty. They'd eat a turtle. They would.

I took all of our money with me for fear of looters, but I would also need much of it for the burial. I put Teardrop in a sack and carried him on my back. And I wrapped my mother in the fire-engine sheet and I carried her, cradle-like, in my arms. She was light. So strangely light. As if made of airy bones.

I trudged uphill. I was desperate to go to the shore to see what had been hurled up from the pit-stomach. But I knew that would be wasteful. I needed to bury my mother and then go back to collect my harvest, as fast as possible.

I walked quickly through uprooted lots. Whole rows of trailers were bashed. Splintered, hobbled. Harvests lost. Where before there were always color-coded lots, now there were just swirls of color like the innards of the gull's stomach—everywhere.

When I started uphill through the tarp fields, they were a mess too. Plastic sheeting had flown all around. There were no paths, no stacks, only swirls of plastic. I had to tromp them down and push through. I had no free arms so I was pushing through with my head and shoulders. Hunched over my mother's body, I was soon surrounded by the mess of it, hemmed in all around. And my mother wasn't as light as she'd first seemed.

The workers shouted to each other. I couldn't see them at first. I only heard their voices. But eventually I got my head above it all and I saw them grabbing corners and shaking the tarps out. It would be forever before they were sorted and laid out to dry again.

Finally, I was high enough to look back at the distant shore. It was clotted with what the pit-stomach had offered. I couldn't see what, exactly, but it was a lot—thick and wild. Pickers moving among it. It called to me. The memory of my mother's voice was in my head, *You never know what you might find out there.*

Hope, that's what she meant. And curiosity is just a form of hope.

Not now, *not yet*, I said back to her in my head. *You need to be cared for and put in a safe place forever.*

There was a road. I followed it to the bury-man's house.

I'm not sure why I was surprised, but there was a line of people with their dead. And off to one side, amid the mounds, a fresh open pit being filled.

The bury-man had put up tents to move through the line faster. I was sent to someone other than the bury-man himself. This man was lean and bent at an angle so his upper body cocked off to the left. "You want to watch?"

I did. "Yes." I took Teardrop from the sack to let him walk around a bit inside the tent. I didn't ask if this was OK and the man didn't seem to notice.

"You've got the money for this?"

“How much is it?”

He told me and it wasn’t too far off from what I’d figured.

“I have half now and I’ll have the other half later, after the season.”

“*This* season? There will be no season, not after the storm’s wreckage.”

“I’ll have the money.” But if someone stole my blue caps, I wouldn’t. I had to move fast.

He accepted this because he knew that bury-man had a way of getting people to pay their debts. I didn’t want to owe bury-man—not anything, ever.

The man worked quickly on my mother’s body, which wasn’t fully rigid yet. He spun her body in clear plastics and adorned the exterior in caps, cut bottles to cuff her arms and hands, straws to show off her long, thin neck.

“And her eyes?” the man said. “You want old kinds of caps, right?”

“I do.”

It would cost me more, but he covered her eyes with old caps—the shiny tin types—and her eyes were protected and they glinted.

And he said a few words. “She will be returned to the earth and brought back anew.”

I wasn’t so sure about this.

“Are you ready?”

My hands lighted over the caps and bottles and straws. “Goodbye,” I said and then my voice choked off. I picked up Teardrop, and he seemed to say his goodbyes too.

I nodded to the man that he could take her.

He tarped her body then, with great efficiency. He called to others, and they carried her out. Laid her to rest in the fresh pit, I guess. I didn’t follow.

I knew that I needed to get back to my lot. But I felt weak and blotted out. I felt ill made, a blur. I felt erased. Teardrop was back in the sack but I had it attached to my chest now. I wanted him near my heart, which felt skittish and light. It pattered but was dim.

Someone will steal my blue caps.

Someone might already be stealing my blue caps. …

And, yet, I was drawn to the shore—*what I might find out there*. Curiosity, hope. I couldn't help it. It was downhill, and as I swam through the tarp fields—shoving my body forward, kicking as hard as I could—I didn't think about anything else but what might be there.

Anything …

Curiosity, hope …

As I got close, I started to run. I passed the bashed trailers and upended lots and kicked through the debris until I could hear the gulf itself. *Luck ... Luck ... Luck.*

I had found a fresh-dead gull. My mother had died. But Teardrop and I survived the storm. And the trailer wasn't bashed. What did this mean for my Luck? Was it gone? Was it sluggish, wobbly, and toppled?

I got to the shore and it had already started to take on the stink of rotting fish and sea creatures. They were laid out—so many dead. Some jellied, some big ribbed, some snouted and whiskered, some with fins, some with suckers. They were splayed amid the bounty of air conditioners, slides and playhouses, pet cages, big yellow tubs. … Ziplocks and chip bags and water bottles bobbed and swayed with the waves and foam, gliding in and out, in and out. The gulf still knew how to breathe. And the pickers were already jumping and running, dismantling and dragging off and packing up what they could.

I climbed on the hood of a dryer. I opened the sack on my chest. I took Teardrop out and I showed him what there was to see. We turned a small circle. It was chaos and loss and opportunity. And the shiver of just before was constant inside of me. I missed my mother and my father. I let myself miss them for a few minutes then I told myself to stop. Because I was changing. I had to. I was becoming someone else.

And then I heard it.

It was a very soft sound. A gurgle. A sputter.

I hopped off the dryer. "Do you hear that, Teardrop? Do you hear it?"

Teardrop heard it too. His head was upright in the light salt breeze. He was gazing around with his wide eyes and curved beak.

I followed the noise. It grew louder. Gasp and gasp again.

And then, a cry—sharp and bleating.

I moved around the grille of a bus and there, in a dip in the sand, was a baby. Wet and surrounded by foam.

I knelt down beside it, a knee on either side of its bare feet. It was naked. I set Teardrop in the sand beside me. “Is it real?” I asked. Its face was not a blur. Its fingers were not one unit. Each of its toes had a toenail all its own. It had boy parts. “Or is it just very high quality?”

Teardrop nestled into the sand. He missed sand, I knew.

I pinched the baby’s nose and he didn’t like it. He shook his head.

“Luck,” I said. “Tell me, Luck. Is this a gift or a curse?” There was no need to save a fake baby. It would weigh me down with the burden of love. A real baby was precious, a small, strange miracle, but it would eat and grow and eat, leaving less for me to survive on, less to pay back the bury-man.

I picked up the baby. I just stared. The baby took in my face. He didn’t cry. And I remembered again what I’d thought before my mother died—when I dumped the pee pan and the storm went soft for a moment.

“Do you have something inside of you that makes you who you are?” I asked the baby.

But then I looked around at everything that would become something else. Each of us is borrowed from others, every bit of us, recycled. “Or … ,” I whispered, “are you part my mother? Part my gone father? Part the old man? Part gull? Part storm?”

I looked down and Teardrop wasn’t there—only his sand prints. Then I saw him heading back to the gulf, as quickly as I’d ever seen him move. Maybe in saving him, I’d trapped him.

I knew he would die out there.

And I let him go. But I knew then, I am part Teardrop. He is part me. We are made of each other. And he’ll die out there in the gulf’s pit-stomach and, when he does, I will die a little too.

And I think this is why I feel like I need the baby—because the baby is alive.

Quick, just like that, I put the baby under my shirt, cupping his rump, and headed home.

The baby’s skin was soft against my stomach’s skin.

But no, that wasn't quite right.

It was more like this—the baby's skin was soft, and then, the very next second, the baby's skin was also my own skin.

Big, Dark Hole

Jeffrey Ford

The school and its fields that are the basic setting of this story don't exist anymore. They were turned into a housing development about forty years ago. I suppose most of the teachers, if not all, are dead. The principal, Mr. Torey, who had a habit of rubbing his throat like the ghost of a hanged man, collapsed in the 15 ITEMS OR LESS aisle at the King Kullen grocery store five years after I graduated from high school. A guy who'd been in the math class I'd failed twice and had failed along with me (I forget his last name but his first name was Jeeb) told me about Torey's demise at a party one night while we were sharing a joint in the basement of this girl's house. He told me Torey suddenly leaned against the checkout counter, like he'd been punched in the gut, and on his way to the floor croaked, "Why?"

Sewer Pipe Hill lay at the edge of the woods, a pregnancy of naked dirt that rose out of the ground and was a perfect launching spot to test out racers. We made go-carts with bicycle training wheels, old baby-carriage wheels, the wheels from shopping carts, and wooden milk cartons with one side banged out for a seat, rope for steering, and two-by-fours rescued from the dead witch's shack deep in the woods where the sassafras grew. When we took the boards from her partially dismantled home, we set what was left standing on fire and ran like only we could through the trails and over the fallen trees, through the sticker-bush tunnels.

The witch was in my dreams after that for a while. She really did look like a witch—pimply face and a long nose. She yelled at us in a foreign language and came out of her place with her cane and kerchief and long coat to chase us. When we were just about out from under the trees and sprinting across the school fields, I always heard her laugh, an urgent birdcall, an icy hand on the back of my neck. How long had she lived there? A long, long time.

The racers we made weren't too fast and they invariably crashed at the bottom of the south slope of the hill where it dipped into a three-foot-straight drop. It wasn't about who had the best time but who had the most glorious crash. My brother was in the lead because he was the most dramatic. Whereas Bill Gorman and Lorel Manzo survived worse hits and wipeouts, my brother screamed, flailed his arms as he fell, and followed it up with copious moaning. We were all doubled over, laughing at him. The other kids were even willing to hand him the victory. We ran down the hill to help him out of the wreck of our racer.

That's when Regina Manzo called out, "Hey, David, what are you doing?" There was David Gorman, bare chested, sneakers and socks already off, removing his khaki shorts. He stood before the maw of the sewer pipe, staring into that big, dark hole. His brother yelled at him to put his pants on. The older Manzo girl, Lorel, covered her eyes and turned away, but Regina stared and smiled. David walked up to the sewer pipe, knelt into it on all fours, and robotically proceeded to crawl forward into the darkness.

"Come back or I'm telling Mom," his brother called after him. By the time we made it to the opening of the pipe, all we caught was a flash of his white underwear before he disappeared into the black. "Come back," we called. "Come back." "There's spiders in there."

"I like spiders," his voice came quietly echoing to us.

"I'm gonna call the cops," yelled Lorel.

"What a knucklehead," my brother said to Bill Gorman.

Bill was in a panic. His parents had left him in charge of David all day and were pretty unforgiving if things went wrong. Tears ran down his face. He screamed, "Shut up or I'll beat you."

Regina Manzo said, "We can catch him up at the manhole cover." She took off running up the hill to the field and followed the asphalt walkway that led toward the school's playground. We tried to catch her, but she was the fastest girl on record. When she reached the spot in the walkway where the round, rusted cover was, she dropped to her knees, leaned forward to put her mouth close to the small hole cut at the rim of it, and shouted. I think she called out his name. When we showed up, she'd turned her head and put her ear to the hole.

“What’d he say?” asked Bill.

“He said to leave him alone,” said Regina.

Bill told Lorel to get on her bike and go tell her mom to call the cops.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” said Lorel. “You’re not my husband.”

“Quick,” Bill cried, “before somebody flushes and he’s drowned.”

My brother took off back toward the hill to fetch his bike.

Bill shoved Regina out of the way and yelled down into the pipe, “What are you doing?”

David must have been right beneath us then. I heard his reply squeeze through the small opening in the manhole cover. His voice rang like an echo in a tin cavern. He said, “Figuring.”

Regina, me, and Lorel all laughed. Even Bill laughed for a second, and then he threatened us that we better shut up.

We stood there in the autumn breeze and sharp sunlight beneath a blue sky in silence until a little while went by and the police showed up. They came in the eastern side entrance to the school fields, having traveled down the packed dirt trail that was Cowpath Road, an ancient route through the woods. They rolled over the remains of broken bottles recently shattered by Bobby Lerner and his gang. Everyone but the adults knew Bobby had a gun and a pocket full of bullets and him and Bobby Shaw and Cho-cho and Mike Wolfe took target practice on empty 40-ounce Colt 45 bottles they’d emptied. My brother had told me just that week he was surprised no one had been shot yet because, as he said, “Lerner’s a totally crazy motherfucker.”

The cops came, and I was hoping they’d flash the lights, but they didn’t. As they inched across the field (good thing nobody was dying), Regina ran toward them waving her arms over her head, her braids bouncing. When she reached them, they stopped and told her to get in the back seat, and she did.

There were two cops. We all knew them. They were often at the school to give talks about not getting into cars with strange people or smoking cigarettes. The big one with the dough face, Officer Flapp, seemed stupid as the day is long, even to me at ten years old. The other was taller, thinner, with a kind of rodent face. His upper teeth hung over his bottom lip and he wore murky glasses. They weren’t sunglasses, you know, with lenses that

look black in the sun. They were sort of light brown. You could still see through them to where his beady, weasel eyes rapidly shifted back and forth. We called him Officer Weezer, because he looked like a weasel. He spoke first as they got out of the car. Flapp opened and held the door for Regina.

"What have we got here?" His eyes were going a mile a minute behind his shitty glasses.

"David Gorman's in the sewer pipes," blurted Lorel Manzo.

"He's down there?" said the Weeze, pointing at the ground.

"He's moved on," said Regina. "He was here a few minutes ago. Who knows where he is now."

"You gotta find him, please," said Bill to the cops.

Weeze told Flapp, "Call the fire department."

"Aye, aye," was the response, a lot slower than it's supposed to be.

"Why's he doing this?" asked Weeze.

"He's figuring," said Regina and laughed.

"Jesus," said the cop and shook his head. "Flapp, tell them to bring Porkchops," he called to his partner.

A few minutes later the fire truck pulled through the front gates of the school and up over the curb with my brother following on his bike. The siren whooped twice as they approached. I thought they were gonna bring lunch from what Officer Weezer had said, but Porkchops turned out to be this stout, fat hound, like a black-and-white beer keg on legs. The driver of the fire truck didn't get out of the cab but rolled down the window and lit up a cigarette. Two other firemen climbed off the back of the truck, all done up —boots, helmets, yellow jackets. Flapp and the Weeze told the firemen what was going on while we listened in. Then Weeze led the way toward Sewer Pipe Hill, Regina Manzo running out in front of them, skipping, doing cartwheels.

It was afternoon by then and the sun was warm even though it was early October. We gathered at the big, dark hole and gazed in. Without anything being said, Porkchops walked up to the concrete face the sewer pipe was set in and pissed on it. Then he crawled up into the hole and proceeded forward at the same rate David Gorman had.

“Does that dog know what it’s doing?” asked Officer Weezer.

The fireman with the big mustache shrugged.

A minute later, we heard Porkchops barking in the distance beneath the ground.

“If someone flushes, will he drown?” Bill asked, tears in his eyes again.

The cops and firemen cracked up. Officer Flapp said, “Your mother should’ve flushed.”

Come that evening, they weren’t laughing anymore. Me and my brother eventually went home for dinner and when we returned to the field there were three cop cars, two more fire trucks, and an ambulance. The local TV reporters were there, Mr. Torey was there, and most of our neighbors who lived by the school. At one point they had a dozen men crawling through the sewer pipes, cops, firemen, special rescue workers.

Mr. and Mrs. Gorman were there too. By that hour Bill had a black eye and a split lip for his trouble. Mrs. Gorman, crazy red hair, horse teeth, and a jaw that didn’t quit, was smoking like a machine and yelling at the chief of police to stick his ass in a meat grinder. Gorman’s old man, with his watery eyes and drooping earlobes, stood there peering into the hole like he was contemplating maybe taking a powder himself. All I knew about him was that he crafted tiny statues from his own earwax like a yellow-brown man on horseback brandishing a saber. He kept it in a matchbox on a piece of cotton.

All through that night, into the morning, and then through the entire next day into the night again the search continued. I overheard one of the firemen say to Mr. Torey that the sewer system beneath the school stretched out for miles in all directions, like a *labyrinth* beneath the neighborhood. That was the word he used, and when we went home, I tried to look it up in the dictionary, but I couldn’t figure out how to spell it. I asked my mother when she came in to kiss me good night, and she said, “It means ‘a maze.’” I thought she meant “amaze,” not “a maze.” All I saw in my mind were so many pipes going every whichway for miles. It made my head spin and left me “amazed.” I fell asleep with that image—a bureaucracy of sewer pipes that reached down to hell and at the edges of their existence slowly propagated more of themselves.

Funny thing, about a month after all this happened, a miracle occurred. Mr. Boyle, the maintenance man over at Our Lady of Persistent Faith, was down in the distant third basement of that centuries-old church and heard a whimpering noise in the dark. He spun around and trained his flashlight in its direction. It appeared to be the ghost of a dog, and Mr. Boyle said the sight of it made him jump. Boyle was also a volunteer fireman, and as he got closer to the dog, he recognized it to be Porkchops. All the creature's hair had turned pure white. After he was taken to the fire station, it was discovered the dog had gone blind. He was very weak and could barely get up to go outside. He died a few days later and was buried with full honors. My father decided Porkchops must have survived "on a steady diet of mice and turds."

"But why'd all his fur turn white?" I asked.

"Some crazy shit," said the old man, shrugged, and went back to reading *The Telegraph*.

By then pretty much everybody had forsaken the vigil and all hope of ever seeing the lost boy again. Only Bill religiously went to Sewer Pipe Hill and called into the big, dark hole, always threatening, hoping for an answer. During that winter, I tried to figure why David Gorman had crawled out of our lives. My mother said of him, "That kid was never right." He was quiet, one of those people who couldn't look you in the eye but just gave you a bashful glance every now and then. He blushed deeply and chewed on the skin of his thumb knuckle. My father said he caught him one day knocking his head repeatedly against the wall of the Gormans' house. They lived next door to us. "He was really banging it," my father said. "His fucking head must be like a coconut." David got in trouble back in fifth grade cause he showed his dick to Regina Manzo at recess one afternoon. She kicked him right in the nuts. It turned into a big deal. Torey had Mr. and Mrs. Gorman in and the cops showed up at school. He got beaten black and blue with a strap by his father and was suspended for three days.

My brother had a theory he laid out for me one night when we sat on the southern slope of Sewer Pipe Hill, looking up at the stars. He smoked a cigarette he'd stolen from my mother. The sun had just set and there was a strong, cold breeze sweeping across the school fields and through the

rattling autumn leaves. “So he crawls in and keeps going,” said my brother, getting ready to launch into his explanation, but I stopped him by asking, “Why?” He sighed, shook his head, and then continued. “So, he’s deep underground and I’ll bet you he hooks up with the mole men.”

“The mole men?” I said.

“Of course.”

“Which mole men? The ones with a load in their pants, bug eyes, and a zipper in the back of their dirt-skin suits? Or the dwarf ones that showed up on *Superman*—ass heads with a ring of hair like Julius Caesar?”

“The real mole men, with snouts and claws for fingers,” he said. “Not that fake stuff. He probably took over down there and is ruling the mole kingdom, inventing hotdogs and racing cars, machine guns and sunglasses. He’s got a mole queen and an army.”

“David Gorman?”

“Just being human makes him king, right?

“So, what’s he doing?”

“Planning a revolt against the surface. When the day comes, he’ll give the order and the mole men and women and children and their pet dogs will spill up into this world, eat everyone’s faces, and turn everything you know and love into dirt.”

My brother’s theory seemed a sign that we’d thought too much about the disappearance. And then, all at once, the mystifying idea of the escapade seeped out of everybody’s minds like old air out of a basketball in December. We went back to the reality we had before David left his conundrum in our lives. I’d pretty much forgotten it. Only when I was passing by Sewer Pipe Hill in the dark on my way home for dinner did the memory of the weird event spark a burst of adrenaline and set me running scared all the way home. Ignorance was bliss until the week before Christmas when Regina Manzo whispered to me at lunch, “Come over today, I have to show you something.” The brushing of her warm words against my earlobe made it hard to swallow.

Dizzy with curiosity, I went directly to Regina’s house after school. When I rang the bell, she answered and waved me in.

“Is it OK with your mother?” I asked.

Regina took my hand and led me upstairs. “My parents aren’t home,” she said.

“What about Lorel?” My heart had started pounding from the moment she took my hand.

“She’s at cello practice.”

When we reached the second floor, we didn’t turn at either of the bedrooms but made a beeline for the bathroom at the end of the hall. I was blushing; my breathing was jittery. She pulled me inside and shut the door behind us. My legs trembled, and I wondered if she was going to make me watch her take a piss or something. She moved in close to me as if we were gonna kiss, but she was simply reaching around me to get to the light switch. She flicked it on and the place lit up so bright I squinted. Brushing past me, she went to a vanity built into the wall and opened a small drawer.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

She put her finger to her lips and then pointed at the toilet as if it were listening. “Come here,” she whispered.

Standing next to her, I could see the scraps of paper she was holding. Laying them out on the surface of the vanity, she quietly said, “There were a lot more, but I threw a bunch out.” I leaned down to get a better look. All of them were wrinkled and the ink was blurred as if they’d been left out in the rain. On one in which the writing was still legible, I read, “Come be with me.” Another bore a strange red blotch of a message. I pointed to it and Regina said, “It’s a heart, like on Valentine’s Day.”

I nodded.

“They come up in the toilet after I pee.”

“What?”

“I flush, and in the new clean water, a message bobs up from the dark hole. I try to snatch them out before the ink is smeared so much I can’t read it. I don’t know what some of them are trying to say.”

“Where are they coming from?”

She silently mouthed the words DAVID GORMAN. “He’s in love with me,” she whispered and shook her head like an adult, in resignation and weariness.

After that, my recall of the incident goes dry, and when I try to force a memory, all I get is a jumble of faces and voices and the rush of seasons out of order. The only other curio I can add to this cabinet is that thirty years later in a bar in O'Hare Airport on the night of a blizzard when nothing was leaving the ground, I met Bill Gorman. He looked like a sadder, larger version of himself as a kid. He drank fast and hard—double Jack Daniel's each go-round. When he laughed, he made the noise but remained expressionless.

I found out that Bill had become a much-sought-after makeup artist in Hollywood, which actually made a creepy kind of sense to me. I asked about his parents, and his response was, "Dead, finally." We went through the list of stuff both of us could remember from the old neighborhood. There was a lot of "Hey, remember … ?" He told me a few things I hadn't heard, like the fact that Lerner, in a suicide attempt, had shot himself in the head but lived to eventually become a priest and that Regina Manzo owned her own tech company and was a millionaire.

Finally, I asked him, "Was there ever anything more about David?" He rubbed his head like a chimp to soothe the bad thoughts and said, "No. The rescue guys finally decided he must have just crawled into one of the hundreds of little passageways down there, got stuck, and couldn't get out. They said that if you get nervous in a tight space your body tends to inflate. Scientists say it's not possible, but these guys worked underground for decades and swore to it. David got stuck, blew up, and died. Rats ate him. Rushing water washed him away.

"After I finally started making a lot of money in Hollywood, I'd go back to the neighborhood once a year. Fly from California, get a limo from JFK, go to Sewer Pipe Hill, stand in front of the hole, and call for David. It was my yearly tribute to my brother. That only lasted until the development went up, and I got caught standing in someone's backyard one night yelling into the dark where a hole used to be. The cops came and I almost got arrested. Luckily one of them was the Weeze, and he remembered me and David. He was thin and wasted and his skin was leathery, like he'd been preserved somehow. You ever seen those Peruvian mummies? Who knows how old he was."

I pictured the Weeze's gaze still shifting but now more slowly, like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. Bill drained his drink. After ordering another, he told me, "You know, Weeze put a paw on my shoulder, patted my back, and said, 'That's all gone now. It hardly exists anymore. Once you let go, it'll be like it never happened.' "

There was much more to this story, though. I can't tell you what it was specifically; I just have a feeling that there was much more. Those parts that are lost to me passed their sell-by dates and my memory unceremoniously tossed them like gray chopped meat from the fridge. Whatever you see here is what I have left. Before I gave Bill my best and fled across the terminal, I asked him why he thought David had done it. "Was he escaping or searching for something?" I said.

He thought for a long time and gave me a heartfelt answer but, wouldn't you know it, I've forgotten what he told me. It was one of the two options I'd offered, I think, but which? It was so frustrating trying to remember. I spent years leaning toward *escaping* and then switched for a decade toward *searching*, only to realize I just couldn't definitively remember what he'd said. A sad thought, like a sour note from Lorel Manzo's long-silenced cello —in another five years or so, what's left of the story will have completely decomposed, fizzed away, fallen back into a big, dark hole.

Waiting for Kizer

Joyce Carol Oates

1.

Waiting for his friend Kizer on the outdoor terrace at the Purple Onion Café, Smith is beginning to be concerned.

They are to meet for lunch at 1:00 p.m. on this day, Friday, June 9. Smith is certain. But already it is 1:26 p.m.

Checks his cell phone another time: no email from Kizer, no call. Tries to call Kizer but *call failed*—not even a ring at the other end.

Second time, unless it's the third the teenaged-looking waitress with buzz-cut hair has approached him with an annoyingly cheerful smile *Excuse me sir shall I bring you something to drink while you wait for—* Smith cuts her off with a glare. Thanks, no! He'd rather wait for his friend.

It is Smith's custom to arrive early to secure a table on the outdoor terrace of the café and to sit facing the entrance so that he can observe strangers without their observing him; also, Smith wants to be in a position to see his friend Kizer approaching before Kizer sights him.

That slight advantage. Inexplicable but unmistakable.

Another time Smith checks his cell phone. Nothing.

It isn't like Kizer to be this late. In their many years of meeting together for lunch—or sometimes meeting for a game of squash beforehand at the university gym—in their many years of friendship, which began decades ago in grade school—Kizer has never been more than ten or fifteen minutes late, Smith is certain.

Well, one distressing time—when Kizer didn't show up at all. (A death in the family?—Smith vaguely recalls.)

Smith leaves his table to inquire of the hostess who has been seating diners on the terrace: has a call come from his friend, for him?—his cell phone doesn't seem to be working, and his friend is a half hour late. …

"D'you mean Nate Kizer? No, Mr. Kizer has not called today."

"Kizer? Do you know him?"—Smith is taken by surprise.

"No, I don't *know him*," the hostess says. "All I know about Mr. Kizer is that he has lunch here sometimes."

"You mean with me—Nate Kizer has lunch with *me*."

"Yes, sir. But with other parties too."

Parties. Not sure what this means.

Tall, streaked-blonde hostess in long peasant skirt like a wraparound quilt smiling at Smith heedless that his heart has been lacerated.

Ridiculous! Why should Smith care that his friend has lunch at the Purple Onion with others, not always him? Of course, Smith doesn't care in the slightest.

He has lunch with other people too. From time to time. At the faculty club at the university.

"Are these 'parties' men? Women?"—Smith is innocently curious.

"Men. Usually." But the streaked-blonde hostess isn't smiling so brightly, as if beginning to wonder if she has said too much.

"Men! I see." Somehow, it seems that Smith would have preferred to hear that Kizer has lunch at the Purple Onion with women.

"But—sometimes women? You said?"

The hostess has not said, exactly. "Well—not for a while. Yes, I think—not for a while. Excuse me, sir—" Clasping the oversized Purple Onion menus to her bosom, the hostess is eager to greet new customers.

He has done it again, Smith thinks. Revealed his insecurity, his existential unease, in an imprudent exchange with a stranger. His shameless curiosity about the lives of others that are no business of his—he knows.

Rebuked, Smith turns away. Returning to his table, he feels a light tap on his arm and there's a man, a stranger, in olive-tinted glasses seated alone at another table—"Excuse me? Were you talking about Nate Kizer? I couldn't help but overhear."

2.

Where the hell is Kizer?—Smith, the most placid of men, the least impatient, is beginning to be annoyed.

It's 1:38 p.m. Kizer is almost forty minutes late. For the third time at least Smith checks his cell phone: no messages. Tries again to call Kizer's cell. Not even a ring. *Call failed.*

Yet stubbornly Smith isn't going to order his own grim lunch, eat alone, and depart. No. He has brought a book to read—*An Anthropology of Time*. Dog-eared paperback he'd picked up on campus, retiring professor (philosophy) emptying his office, stacks of books once diligently read, underlined, and annotated, "taught"—now abandoned on a table in a busy foyer.

But Smith can't concentrate on mere words. Peers again at the goddamned phone cupped in his hand like a talisman.

(Has Smith, like virtually everyone he knows, become compulsive about checking his phone? Good that his family can't know. Scolding fifteen-year-old Trevor for spending so much time on his phone or online, video games up in his room. …)

Smith has to wonder if something happened between him and Kizer of which he isn't aware. Longtime friendships can become strained, precarious. Tries to recall the last time they saw each other—in fact, here at the Purple Onion a few weeks ago—if Kizer was behaving strangely, Smith noticed nothing.

Resents you. Feels inferior to you. Since you saved his life. No good deed goes unpunished.

It's a fact, no need to bring it up, when they were boys, Matt Smith saved Nate Kizer's life. Smith rarely thinks of the incident but guesses that Kizer thinks of it often.

Saving another's life. How it reflects upon your own.

Smith wonders: was his life altered, at eleven? Suffused with a sense of confidence as his friend's life must have become suffused with a sense of unease, insecurity. Debt.

For the past several years Smith and Kizer have been meeting for lunch at the Purple Onion Café, a relatively new restaurant located midway between Smith's office at the university and Kizer's office at the medical center. The café isn't either man's first choice but it is moderately priced, unpretentious, specializes in "organic" food, and in warm weather there is outdoor seating.

Good too that the Purple Onion doesn't have a liquor license.

Today, Smith has driven his car to the Purple Onion. Very likely Kizer will drive too. Not long ago each was likely to bicycle, walk, or even jog to lunch. There'd been a subtle rivalry between them: who would take the easier course, by driving.

Though he has become somewhat paunchy around the middle, and is sometimes short of breath climbing stairs, Smith considers himself more athletic than Kizer, overall. Taller than Kizer, just slightly. Leaner, more fit. More levelheaded. Less likely to brood, hold a grudge. He thinks so.

Smith's marriage, Smith's children: on the whole, more satisfactory than Kizer's. Possibly, Kizer's career has been more impressive.

Like (identical) twins, in a way. In such relationships there is inevitably the *dominant*, *stronger* twin.

"Let's play squash next week," Smith plans to suggest to Kizer. Strange, it has been months since the men have played together. …

It has become Smith's custom to arrive a few minutes early at the Purple Onion. In this way, he has the advantage. Asks for a corner table shielded from the sidewalk by a wisteria trellis. Always brings a book with him, lowers his head as if reading while observing diners at other tables, arrivals at the entrance. In a familiar reverie fantasizing strangers stripped naked and at his mercy. … Boldly copulating with the (attractive) women, who never resist his advances; overpowering, humiliating the men. (Of course, Matt Smith is *not like this* at all. The most civilized of men, a gentlemanly man; in fact, embarrassed when strangers turn out to be known to him, women friends of his wife's, mothers of his children's friends; the lewd fantasies dissolve at once.)

And he is keen to sight Kizer before Kizer sights him—who can say why?

Owes his life to me. Like no one else in the world. Every heartbeat, every breath—Kizer has to acknowledge.

Born within a few months/miles of each other in San Rafael, California. Grade school, high school. Friends, rivals. Kizer was chess champion of the school district three years in a row but Smith was elected president of the class in their junior year; Kizer barely managed to get on the track team but Smith still recalls, with a smile, that amazing season when, on the junior varsity softball team, until then just an OK player, he'd hit a crucial home run—and earned the grudging admiration of Coach Fenner.

True, both boys were attracted to the same girls. And true, the girls might've preferred Kizer except Kizer was too shy, socially maladroit, to take advantage.

Who had *fallen in love* first? That remains unclear.

Kizer graduated third in their class of four hundred twenty-two; Smith graduated twelfth, but was admitted to UC Santa Cruz with a full-tuition scholarship while Kizer had only a part-tuition scholarship at Stanford.

Away at college they'd lost contact, or mostly. But each returned to San Rafael in their late twenties. Married within a few months of each other. Started families, established careers. Only just coincidental, each man has fathered three children: girl-girl-boy (Smith), boy-boy-girl (Kizer).

At a short distance, the wives of Smith and Kizer might—almost—be mistaken for each other, but it's strange, at least Smith thinks it's strange, that Lisa (Smith) and Emma (Kizer) have never quite become friends despite their husbands' urging.

When Smith asks Lisa why, Lisa merely shrugs and insists that she likes Kizer's wife *well enough*; possibly, Emma responds in a similar manner if Kizer asks her about Lisa.

One of Smith's (secret) fantasies is Kizer in love with Lisa, which leaves him breathless and excited as well as humiliated, emasculated, while, oddly, Smith feels little attraction for Kizer's wife, Emma, who in turn seems indifferent to him, if not, unless Smith is imagining it, just slightly resentful. *Of course, she is jealous. Her husband's closest friend, to whom he owes his life.*

At the age of forty-nine Smith is beyond adolescent rivalries and so no longer measures himself against Kizer: wife, children, career. House, cars. Kizer is arguably better looking than Smith, as he'd been the better student in high school, but Smith is in better physical condition, he is sure, though stricken with sciatica last year, which is why he'd cut back on squash. Still, in better condition than Kizer, who has been afflicted since childhood by asthma. Surely still a stronger swimmer than Kizer, which was why, on the rain-swollen San Miguel River, Boy Scout camp, when the boys were eleven years old and their canoe overturned, it was Smith who (desperately) managed to drag (frantically struggling) Kizer back to the canoe so that each boy, skinny, shivering with cold and fear, could hold onto it until help came.

Saved my life! Oh God thank you.

Kizer has never quite said.

Why, Smith can understand. Some memories are so traumatic it is wisest to forget. Amnesia like a spray-washed wall.

Yet: Smith sometimes feels trapped in a dream he doesn't (quite) realize is a dream in which he is trying again to swim to his struggling/drowning friend while simultaneously trying not to let go of the overturned canoe; then, trying to explain to Kizer something both elemental and obscure, crucial for both to comprehend so that Smith's very brain aches with the effort, which is the mysterious *effort of the dream*: *neurological*, *muscular*. Even as his tongue is thick and clumsy, his words stumble and falter.

Your name is called. You turn, and it is yourself—yet not you.

In actual life if Smith were to stammer such nonsense Kizer would laugh in that soundless way of his, rocking with laughter as if it pained him. For over the years, decades, Kizer has been the one to deflate Smith's existential quandaries. When Smith takes himself too seriously, count on Kizer to puncture the balloon.

Dear God. If something has happened to Kizer, what will you do?

Smith tries to think. Does not dare think.

Looming over him is a waiter asking if he'd like a drink? while he's waiting for his friend? Smith peers up at a tall, lanky-limbed young man,

wispy beard, dreadlocks halfway down his back. *White?* Food server with (unwashed, oily) *dreadlocks*?

Damned Purple Onion, hiring freaks. Hippie pretensions, health food and "gluten-free." Smith glances around, searching for the waitress with the buzz-cut hair—or had that been another lunch?

Anyway, the Purple Onion doesn't serve *drinks*. Dreadlocks must mean one of their health-food concoctions—carrot-avocado-yogurt smoothie, pomegranate-lemon spritzer, "Green Rush" (kale, spinach, broccoli, seaweed liquefied). Next time Smith will insist that Kizer meet him somewhere else.

Smith thanks the waiter but no. He will wait for his friend before ordering.

Turning back to his book, rereading a passage already marked with yellow Magic Marker—*Time is an illusion in which we "remember" the past but not the future. As quantum physicists have revealed—* but distracted by the fact that Kizer is uncharacteristically late, and hasn't called or texted; possibly Smith's phone is malfunctioning, in which case if there's an emergency Kizer won't be able to reach him. Smith shoves back his chair, hurries to the hostess to explain the situation and ask if his friend might've called and whoever answered the phone inside the restaurant failed to relay the message to him out on the terrace. …

The hostess listens with a little frown of sympathy. But no—"Mr. Kizer hasn't called today, I'm sure."

"You know my friend's name?" Smith is taken aback for (he is sure) he hadn't (yet) given it.

3.

Returning to his table, Smith feels a light tap on his arm.

"Excuse me? Were you talking about Nate Kizer? I couldn't help but overhear."

Smith is confounded: here is an individual he has never seen before, he's sure, who yet seems familiar to him.

A stranger in his late forties perhaps, in olive-tinted glasses, peering intently, quizzically, at Smith.

"Y-yes. Nate Kizer. We're having lunch together, today."

"*We're* having lunch together, today. Nate and me."

Strained smiles. Stares of disbelief, suspicion.

How is this possible? Smith is thinking—*obviously, there is some simple explanation. A mistake.*

"Obviously, there is some explanation. A mistake." The stranger speaks slowly with a clenched jaw.

Such a situation would call for levity, one might think. Yet Smith and the man in the olive-tinted glasses exude an air of hostility, distrust.

Carefully Smith says: "If this is Friday, June 9, there's no mistake. Kizer and I are having lunch today; we were supposed to meet at 1:00 p.m."

"*We* were supposed to meet at 1:00 p.m. Kizer and me."

The two men stare at each other, perplexed and resentful.

Smith sees that the other, the stranger, is gripping his cell phone. No doubt he too has been trying to call Kizer without success.

"Possibly a joke? Or—"

"—a mistake. Kizer's —"

"—he wants us to meet?"

No! Can't believe this. Kizer would've alerted Smith he'd invited someone else to join them.

Something disturbingly familiar about the man who has dared to touch Smith's arm, to stop him on his way back to his table. His voice is nasal, sounding like Smith's own voice when he has a stuffed head; his manner is awkward, as if his limbs are poorly coordinated, or he has back pain. His not very attractive face is asymmetrical as if there were an uneven crack down the center and half the face has resettled, as after a seismic shift.

His (coarse, sand-colored, graying) hair is receding sharply from his forehead, his eyes appear to be deep socketed, glistening. Unlike Smith, who is wearing, as he often does, a fresh tattersall shirt, clean khakis, and running shoes in reasonably good condition, the other is wearing a not-fresh shirt of no distinction, jeans beginning to fray at the knee, sandals that expose bony white toes. His forehead is furrowed and mildly blemished, or

scarred, from adolescent acne. His mouth is a smirk that disguises (Smith guesses) an underlying unease.

"And you are—?"

"Matt Smith."

"*Matt* Smith? Well—I'm *Matthew*."

Staring at each other. Slow blinking. Is this a joke?

"Well! What's your middle name?" (Matt) Smith steels himself.

"'Maynard.' You?"

"'Maynard.'"

"You're joking, right?"

"*You're* joking. Right?"

Surge of belligerence between the men. Rush of adrenaline. One is obviously an impostor, but—which?

"No. I am not joking. If you'd like to see ID …"

"If *you'd* like to see ID …"

Now (Matt) Smith realizes: the other's olive-tinted glasses with metallic frames are near identical to a pair of glasses he'd once had, replaced with the black plastic frames and bifocal lenses he is now wearing.

Smith, that's to say (Matt) Smith, feels a wave of dizziness. As if the terrace floor is beginning to shift beneath his feet. (Earthquake? San Rafael? Not unknown.) He is thinking that something like this has happened before. He has survived, previously. Or had it been a dream, and not real? *Is* this a dream, and not real?

A name is called; it is your name. You turn, you approach—it is yourself, though not (literally) you. He feels a rush of curiosity about the other man that leaves him weak, sickened.

Seeing the expression in (Matt) Smith's face, (Matthew) Smith pulls out a chair at his table. "Hey, man—you're looking kind of pale. Better sit down."

"I—I don't think that—"

"Yeah. You'd better."

(Matthew) Smith is brusque, bullying. (Matt) Smith feels a surge of repugnance for the man, a sensation of dread deep in the gut. Just as he'd felt often as a boy, confronted with older, more dominant boys. Wanting to

scream at them, *Go to hell. Leave me alone. Don't touch me!* Yet, (Matt) Smith sits at the table as bidden.

Soon it is established: both (Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith live in San Rafael, (Matt) Smith on Buena Vista Street and (Matthew) Smith on Solano Street; each was born in San Rafael on July 24, 1969; the names of their parents are identical—"Cameron and Joellen Smith."

Coincidence? Not very likely.

And yet—what else, but coincidence?

In his shock, disorientation (Matt) Smith yet has time for a petty satisfaction—Buena Vista is a much more elegant street than Solano, more expensive houses, quieter neighborhood. Whoever (Matthew) Smith is, or is presuming to be, he is less affluent than (Matt) Smith as well as heavier, slack jowled.

"Guess we must be related? Somehow. …"

"Must be. Yes."

"Except—I've never heard of you before. …"

"—never heard of *you* before."

"Jesus!"—whistling thinly through his teeth.

As (Matthew) Smith speaks, (Matt) Smith glances about the terrace at other tables. Trying to get his bearings. (*Is* the floor shifting? No.) There is the hostess in her striking wraparound skirt, there is the (white) kid with the skimpy beard and ghastly dreadlocks tumbling down his back. It's a warm, balmy June day, hazy sky like a smudged watercolor. *Sfumato*—is that the technical term? Bizarre that the other diners, mostly women, are chattering companionably together oblivious of (Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith in their midst, each as confounded by the other's existence as by the appearance of a basilisk. Covertly glancing at each other, fascinated, repelled.

(Matt) Smith tries to speak, has to clear his throat: "Well! What're the odds?"

(Matthew) Smith coughs, laughs: "… fucking coincidence. …"

Embarrassment settles between them. Sudden shyness.

"D'you think …"

"Do *you* think …"

"Some sort of—genetic …"

"Orphans, from the same family? Adopted—"

"But I'm not—adopted. …"

"*I'm* not. At least I think so. …"

"*I* think so too. I *know so*."

The men are excited, breathless. Wanting to laugh and yet each feels threatened, endangered. (Matt) Smith worries that it is some sort of bullying contest; the rougher and less civilized man will triumph.

But no, not possible. Not on the terrace of the Purple Onion.

(Matt) Smith notices that (Matthew) Smith has been reading a magazine while waiting for Kizer—looks like *Scientific American*. (This too is an obscure coincidence, for (Matt) Smith subscribed to *Scientific American* as a brainy high-school kid years ago. But he has long since allowed the subscription to lapse.) Seeing that (Matt) Smith has noticed the magazine, (Matthew) Smith says with an embarrassed shrug: "It's a paradox how we 'see' objects with our eyes—objects and one another—yet with a microscope we 'see' a very different micro reality, magnified. Which is 'real'? Is one 'more real' than the other?"

Why, (Matthew) Smith has intellectual pretensions! (Matt) Smith resents him all the more.

"We see what we want to see."

"We see what we've been told to see."

"What we've been told we want to see—that's what we 'see.'"

(Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith laugh together, guardedly. Shyly glancing at each other.

(Matt) Smith concedes: "There's a natural bias in humankind toward the unexamined. For what we think to be common experience. We have to suppress—censor—what contradicts our sense of the 'real.' Otherwise—"

"Of course! 'Otherwise.'"

There is a pause. The men reconsider. (Matt) Smith still finds the situation unnerving but is beginning to feel that, yes, he might master it, control it, come out on top somehow with an anecdote Kizer will find wonderfully entertaining when (Matt) Smith recounts it to him.

Not very politely, in fact rudely, (Matthew) Smith snaps his fingers at the dreadlocked waiter, who has been hovering nearby in the hope that, at last, the men have orders for him. “Hey? Over here? Drinks for both of us.”

(Matt) Smith orders a pomegranate-lemon spritzer. Not with much enthusiasm but the spritzer seems the most palatable drink at the Purple Onion. (Matthew) Smith orders a Bloody Mary.

“Bloody Mary? Here? They don’t serve Bloody Marys here.”

“Of course they serve Bloody Marys here. Why’d we come here, if they didn’t? Ask Kizer.”

“Kizer doesn’t drink at lunch. …”

“Kizer certainly drinks at lunch. And drinks are served here.” (Matthew) Smith appeals to the dreadlocked waiter, who laughs politely as if (Matthew) Smith has said something witty. Indeed, on the table is a drinks list.

Drinks at the Purple Onion Café? Since when? (Matt) Smith is amazed.

“Since they reopened. After the renovation. You must have heard, since you live in San Rafael, that a suicide bomber set off a homemade bomb here last fall?”

(Matt) Smith has not heard. Or rather, (Matt) Smith has heard, but —“That was just a ridiculous rumor, Matthew. It never happened.”

His heart trips. Just slightly. Calling the other *Matthew*.

“Certainly it happened.”

“No. Certainly it *did not*.”

“Look, I live in this town. The bombing was big news. Three people died plus the teenaged bomber. Half the restaurant collapsed; they had to rebuild. It just opened again—when?—in March. I met Kizer for lunch, we sat on the terrace and talked about how strange it felt, to be having lunch here—where people had died. …”

Lunch with Kizer? Here? Renovation? (Matt) Smith doubts this.

“You can see by the wisteria—there hasn’t been any damage. Those trees by the parking lot … The Purple Onion was repainted, I think, and some alterations were made, but—not …” (Matt) Smith begins to stammer, this is so absurd. Suicide bombing! Purple Onion! “Someone played a prank, called in a bomb threat, but it turned out to be a hoax. The café was

evacuated; in fact, Kizer and I were supposed to meet for lunch that day but the area was cordoned off. False bomb threats were called in to the high school and the hospital too, that day. …"

(Matthew) Smith retorts: "Those bomb threats came *after* the bomb at the Purple Onion. There was an actual bomb here. A kid from the neighborhood, high-school dropout, he'd made a bomb at home and just walked over here with it."

No, no! Nothing remotely like that happened. (Matt) Smith is laughing, frustrated. Trying to remain calm in the face of the other's obstinacy as he has had to do, as a rational person, through much of his life. "It was a stupid prank some high-school kids played to get one of their classmates in trouble. This poor kid, innocent kid, he'd been bullied mercilessly. …" (Matt) Smith's voice is shaking. Recalling those terrible days when Lisa called him in his office sobbing on the phone. *Trevor refuses to go to school. He has locked himself in the bathroom. I am so afraid he will hurt himself. ... Why can't you come home!*

(Matthew) Smith continues to insist that, yes, there was a *suicide bomb* here. Asks the dreadlocked waiter, who grimaces, smiles nervously, says, yes, he guesses so, last year, before he'd moved to San Rafael and started working here, yes, there was said to have been a *suicide bombing*. Here.

(Matt) Smith shakes his head. Ridiculous! His face is hot with indignation but damned if he will continue this fatuous exchange.

It is clear that (Matthew) Smith is a damaged personality. The kind of person who pursues a subject when it is evident that others do not wish to continue. Gratified, vindicated, (Matthew) Smith yet takes a new tact, lowering his (nasal, maddening) voice in a way to suggest sympathy, pity.

"I know, Matt—you don't want to think about it. That is your prerogative. That is only *natural*. You and your wife—I would imagine—whoever she is—would rather—rather *not*." But now (Matthew) Smith has gone too far, uttering the words *your wife*.

"And you? Do you have a wife?" (Matt) Smith sneers.

Barely can (Matt) Smith bring himself to look at (Matthew) Smith's coarse, asymmetrical face. Barely, to acknowledge the watery eyes just visible behind smudged olive-tinted lenses.

"I have an—ex-wife."

"Ah. I see. *Ex.*"

"You don't 'see,' I think." Now (Matthew) Smith's voice is quavering, indignant. (Matthew) Smith glances about the terrace with an angry smile. (Where the hell is his drink? How long have they been waiting?)

Next question should be, what is the *ex-wife's* name? But (Matt) Smith refuses to ask this question, just yet.

4.

Damn Kizer! Now forty-five minutes late.

And no call from him, no explanation or apology.

At least their drinks have been brought by the dreadlocked waiter: a Bloody Mary for each.

(Matt) Smith doesn't recall ordering a Bloody Mary but, hey, this is fine. Tomato juice for physical well-being, vodka for confidence.

"We might as well order our lunches too. What d'you think?" (Matthew) Smith swallows a large mouthful of the neon-red drink.

Not waiting for (Matt) Smith to join him as he drinks. Not suggesting a toast to their having, so oddly, met. (Matt) Smith feels just slightly rejected by the other, more blustery man in a rumpled shirt of no distinction while he, (Matt) Smith, makes it a point to wear a freshly laundered shirt each day, often a tattersall, on principle.

Never would (Matt) Smith wear such old, ugly sandals as (Matthew) Smith is wearing! Never would he expose ugly, misshapen toes, discolored toenails. His teenaged children would be utterly mortified by him. His wife would recoil in dismay, disgust. And (Matt) Smith thinks too well of himself: his masculine pride.

Seeing again the scattering of minuscule acne scars on (Matthew) Smith's forehead, (Matt) Smith feels a surge of satisfaction. *He* was spared such petty indignities in high school where appearances matter so much.

"Yes. Let's order. If Kizer turns up …"

"… he'll be surprised to see us."

(Matthew) Smith snaps his fingers another time, summons the waiter. Gives his order while (Matt) Smith studies the menu just slightly confused for there are new items listed; not every dish is labeled *organic*, *local*, *gluten-free*.

(Matthew) Smith has ordered a hamburger, medium rare. With French fries. (Matt) Smith has not had a hamburger in years, tries to avoid red meat, is tempted to follow his companion, but decides no, a cold salmon platter might be better.

(Matthew) Smith remarks that he'd last seen Kizer two weeks ago for lunch, after playing squash. *He* hadn't played as well as usual, sciatica kicking up again, so Kizer had won, but just barely.

(Matt) Smith feels a pang of jealousy. Do (Matthew) Smith and Kizer see each other so frequently? At two-week intervals? Kizer only has time for (Matt) Smith every four, five weeks. And they have not played squash in months.

Feeling an impulse to confide in (Matthew) Smith, he sometimes wonders if indeed Kizer is his close friend as he wishes to think. If indeed (Matt) Smith has any friends at all.

Recalling how sometimes Kizer will tell him he can't make lunch this week, has to postpone lunch next week, plans have changed and he will have to cancel. … But possibly (Matthew) Smith is lying? Something devious about the hooded eyes behind the olive-tinted lenses, that insidious nasal voice.

Then, (Matthew) Smith's phone rings. (Matt) Smith feels a pang of anxiety, that the call will be from Kizer.

For him. For the other. Not for me. ...

But (Matthew) scowls, listening—the call seems to be of no significance, or a wrong number.

(Matthew) Smith puts away his phone. (Matt) Smith has already put away his phone, in his shirt pocket.

(Matthew) Smith remarks that Kizer never used to be late, until recently. (Matt) Smith denies this: Kizer is never late, at all.

"Well, since that—misunderstanding—with my wife—or whatever it was—Kizer has begun to be less reliable."

“Misunderstanding? With—who? Who is your wife?” (Matt) Smith’s heart is beating rapidly.

“My wife? Lisa.”

“Lisa! You don’t mean—Lisa Finch?”

(Matthew) shrugs, grimacing. If this is a joke, it is a just-barely-amusing joke.

“Well, yes—Lisa Finch.”

“But—that’s not possible? Is it?”

A pause. Neither can quite look the other in the eye.

“Lisa Finch—from Petaluma.”

“Petaluma? No. I don’t think so. Sacramento.”

“Well, yes—born in Sacramento. But her parents moved to Petaluma when she was two.”

“Five, I think. When she was five.”

“*Two.* I’m sure.”

Another pause. Breathless.

At last (Matthew) Smith says, in an even voice: “We were talking about Kizer, actually. How, since a ‘misunderstanding’ with my wife (at the time my wife, not *ex*-), he hasn’t been so reliable. Though we are still friends—of course. Each of us the other’s oldest friend.”

“Wait. What was this ‘misunderstanding’?”

“Is it possible that you don’t know? Yet?”

“Don’t know what ‘yet’?”

They stare at each other for a long moment before realizing—*This person is me. Yet—not-me.*

Fortunately, breaking the tension, their lunches are brought to them by the dreadlocked waiter, who has been glancing at them, from one to the other and back again, with an expression resolutely neutral.

Also, their drinks are depleted, or nearly. (Matthew) Smith orders another Bloody Mary. (Matt) Smith hesitates, then orders another Bloody Mary.

“Yes, it’s ‘early in the day.’ But one more won’t hurt.”

“Most sensible thing you’ve said yet.”

(Matthew) Smith laughs, baring big ungainly, stained teeth.

He had braces, took care of his teeth, (Matt) Smith thinks. His parents had loved him and provided dental, medical care for him.

"I see that your hair has thinned," (Matthew) Smith says with a sly spider dimple of a smile, and (Matt) Smith says, not missing a beat, like the capable ping-pong player he'd been as a kid, "I see that you've had some skin trouble. Carcinomas?"—in a tone of sympathy.

(Matthew) Smith winces. (Is it so visible?) Conceding that, yes, he'd had several small, coin-sized skin cancers removed from his forehead and cheeks a few months ago, in a dermatologist's office. *Not* major surgery.

"Dermatologist? Who's that?"

"Dr. Friedland. A woman."

"Friedland! She isn't a dermatologist, she's our GP."

"*Your* GP, maybe. *My* dermatologist."

Wary with each other. Falling quiet as they eat their lunches. (Matt) Smith is feeling slightly light-headed—vodka so early in the day. … He has noted how thirstily (Matthew) Smith drinks, disapprovingly. The man is an incipient alcoholic.

"You'd said, your wife—*ex*-wife—is named Lisa Finch?"

(Matthew) Smith shrugs, chewing. His mouth is bracketed by lines like fissures. Clearly doesn't want to pursue the subject but (Matt) Smith can't resist.

Saying, with a curious sort of tenderness, "I'd thought you—we—l-loved her—loved Lisa."

(Matthew) Smith laughs indulgently. "What's 'love'—a matter of perspective."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we 'love' people to the degree to which we don't know them. Beyond that point, 'love' falters, fails."

(Matt) Smith protests: "I—I am sure—I love my wife very much. …"

(Matthew) Smith coughs, laughs. Clears his throat.

"It's a matter, as I've said, of perspective. Of seeing the object with the naked eye, or through a microscope."

"But what went wrong? With you and your Lisa. …"

“Matt, why would you want to know? If you’re ignorant of—well, your wife and Kizer—”

“‘My wife and Kizer’? What do you mean?”

(Matt) Smith falters. His bolder self meant to exclaim, *What the hell do you mean!*

With a curious sort of dignity, or obstinacy, (Matthew) Smith tells (Matt) Smith that he is better off not knowing.

“But—I don’t want to remain ignorant. I want to know—whatever it is that I don’t seem to know. …”

“Look, we aren’t the same person. We aren’t ‘identical.’ What is true for me isn’t necessarily true for you. All I can tell you is what I know—suspected. For years I’d been suspicious of Lisa and Kizer. That softness in her face when she looked at him, spoke of him. The way she went blank sometimes when I touched her, as if she wanted to throw off my hand but didn’t dare. The way she would shrug away from me, shivering. Then again she would ask about the canoe accident, how close I’d actually come to drowning, and how my friend Nate Kizer ‘saved’ me.” (Matthew) Smith pauses, brooding. “Those many times she seemed depressed, burst into tears. …”

“Nate Kizer saved *you*? But—that isn’t possible. … I was the one to save *him*.”

A long pause falls upon the men, like vapor. A chill vapor, causing (Matt) Smith to shudder.

For vividly (Matt) Smith remembers: the rain-swollen river, pulling his oar in water denser than water should be, a boy screaming, panic—then, in rushing water, so much colder than he’d expected. …

“I was the one to save *him*. I—I saved Nate Kizer’s life when we were eleven years old. …”

(Matthew) Smith shrugs. As if to say *OK, so what?*

“I—don’t remember Nate ever telling me he’d saved anyone’s life. I mean—if he had, he’d have told me. …” (Matt) Smith hears his voice faltering, failing. Clearly (Matthew) Smith remembers an episode very different from his. Though they are seated only a few inches from each

other, at the wrought-iron terrace table, it's as if there is a chasm between them.

"And my wife—Lisa—she's a very different person from your wife. *Ex*-wife. We are each other's closest friend—or almost. We have no secrets from each other." Though it is true, (Matt) Smith must concede, that from time to time Lisa succumbs to migraine headaches and doesn't want him to touch her or even to speak to her.

Ridiculous, to imply, as (Matthew) Smith seems to have implied, that Kizer has had some sort of long affair with Lisa. No.

In (Matthew) Smith's own marriage, that might be the case. Why the marriage ended.

"My Lisa is—is not—in love with another man, I am sure."

(Matt) Smith laughs dismissively, as if that were proof.

In a friendly toast, unless it's a mocking toast, (Matthew) Smith lifts his Bloody Mary toward (Matt) Smith, taps (Matt) Smith's glass with his own.

"Here's to *us*. Fuck *them*."

Boastfully, (Matthew) Smith allows (Matt) Smith to know that he'd dropped out of college in his freshman year at UC Irvine, only barely graduated from high school—"Too much weed. Jesus! I think my cerebral cortex turned to vapor." But (Matthew) Smith laughs, indulgently. Better than hanging himself, which was the alternative at fifteen, never got over being rejected by Coach Fenner trying out for JV softball, the blunt way Fenner dismissed him in front of the others, mean son of a bitch not seeming to know how vulnerable a fifteen-year-old boy is, especially a fifteen-year-old with acne. Why he'd spent most of high school stoned. His only friend was Kizer, who felt sorry for him, frankly. Wouldn't have had the courage to actually hang himself just like on the river, when he'd panicked and overturned the canoe he hadn't had the courage to swim to shore and had almost drowned Kizer trying to help him, Jesus!—never live it down, his dying day he'd be remembering.

Well—he'd gone back to college. San Jose State. Lost contact with Kizer until he moved back to San Rafael and started some kind of new life, or tried to.

"Weird thing was they'd known each other in college. I mean, when they were in college. Though they didn't go to the same college. Kizer and Lisa. They'd—you know …" (Matthew) Smith makes a crude, obscene gesture, of a kind (Matt) Smith has not seen in decades.

"And you know this how?" (Matt) Smith is repelled.

"She told me. When it was over between us. Rubbing salt in my wounds, like a bitch will do."

(Matt) Smith laughs. (Matthew) Smith is so crude!

(Matthew) Smith stares at (Matt) Smith, considering. "You think that she —'your' Lisa—wasn't fucking Kizer, off and on for years? Really? And you know this how?"

"I won't dignify that by answering."

"Well, good for you! That's what a man like me lacks, fatally—dignity." (Matthew) Smith laughs.

In truth, (Matt) Smith is fevered with curiosity. Almost a sort of sexual hunger. But goddamn, *he will not be baited.*

The men decide, it seems simultaneously, to take another tack: children.

"You have children, Matt? How many?"

"Yes! Two girls, one boy." (Matt) Smith smiles proudly. A daddy whose children adore him. "And you?"

"None."

"*None?* Not—even one?"

"'Not even one.'"

"Well—that's too bad. …"

Awkward words. (Matt) Smith is stricken with curiosity but hesitates to blunder further for perhaps (Matthew) Smith or his wife is infertile. …

"You could say 'minus-one.' A miscarriage." (Matthew) Smith speaks in a voice flat as the tabletop.

"Hey. I'm sorry. …" (Matt) Smith is taken by surprise.

"Why sorry? It happened a long time ago. Seems like it could've been other people actually."

(Matt) Smith ponders. Is (Matthew) Smith speaking bravely, to disguise sorrow or is (Matthew) Smith speaking with an infuriating air of complacency, just this side of a snigger?

Recalling that Lisa had had a miscarriage too—hadn't she? In an early year of their marriage. …

"At least, that's what Lisa claimed. Frankly," (Matthew) Smith snorts with laughter, "I had a suspicion at the time that she might've had an abortion. At the women's clinic, in secret."

"When was this?"

"When? What difference does it make? Might've been a year or two after we were married."

(Matt) Smith feels a sensation of cold. Horror. (Matthew) Smith's laughter is inappropriate, bizarre. (Matt) Smith frowns gravely; he will not be drawn into the other's mood. Thinking how if Lisa had lost their first baby, Constance would never have been born. … Their daughter, now a senior at USC.

(Matt) Smith loves his daughter Constance. Wanting to gloat to (Matthew) Smith—*You have no idea what it is, the love of a beautiful daughter. Poor bastard.*

"The second pregnancy, or whatever it was," (Matthew) Smith continues imperturbably, "we'd both agreed should be terminated. The world is a 'terrible place'—'already too many people on the planet'—plus I'd been transferred to San Jose preparatory to being 'downsized.' The saying in our business is *San Jose, doom on the way*. And we weren't getting along too well, even then. Then," (Matthew) Smith says, with a smirk of a smile, "the bitch dared to claim later that she'd been coerced by me into having an abortion—in fact, more than one—and she'd actually wanted to have children." (Matthew) Smith snorts with mirthless laughter.

"Wait. I don't understand. …"

"*I* do. It's only required of the husband, to understand."

What this means (Matt) Smith is not curious to know. Saying quickly, as one might grab a towel to cover one's groin in Boy Scout camp: " *My* wife —my Lisa—wanted children from the start. Lisa always loved babies. She'd played with dolls—she said. Lisa and I love our kids. Lisa has been a wonderful mother. Can't imagine what our lives would be like without our children. …" (Matt) Smith hears these words trundle across the table like dull, thumping dominoes, falling.

“‘Can’t imagine’—? Really?” (Matthew) Smith is frankly sniggering now. “I can’t imagine what my life would’ve been like with children dragging me down.”

(Matt) Smith protests: “Children don’t *drag you down*, *they buoy you up*.”

His words sound hollow, insincere. Doggedly he perseveres: “When your spirits are low, when you doubt the worth of living, you have only to look at your children, and understand that they are the reason you were born.”

As these words issue from (Matt) Smith’s mouth he feels a numbing sensation suffuse his mouth, his throat, and lungs as if he is breathing in ether.

(Matthew) Smith nods gravely, ironically. As if he has never heard anything so profound.

“‘When your spirits are low, when you doubt the worth of living, you have only to look at your children, and see the blessings you’ve been given. …’ That sounds even more beautiful, Matt. Makes me rethink everything I’ve believed, or wanted to believe. Maybe I should’ve made my wife have children.”

Seeing that (Matt) Smith blinks at him in astonishment, (Matthew) Smith bursts into laughter.

Loose jowled, fatty chest, rippling flesh around his waist. How in hell has (Matthew) Smith let himself go, not yet fifty years old? Shame!

“You are despicable,” (Matt) Smith says coldly. “You make a mockery of everything decent. You’ve let your entire life be ruined by—an act of cowardice when you were eleven years old.”

“What do you know about me? You don’t know shit about me.”

“*You* don’t know shit about me.”

So distracted by their conversation, the men have stopped eating. Each is trembling, indignant.

Oh, where *is Kizer*? Kizer would know what to make of this impasse like King Solomon rendering judgment. (Matt) Smith knows, just knows, that Kizer would rule for *him*.

A precarious moment when each of the men is about to spring up from the table, back away from the other in dismay and disgust, and depart—

except—the thought occurs to (Matt) Smith, random and whimsical as the small yellow butterfly drifting past his head, that he has the power to make (Matthew) Smith laugh, even against his will—"What do an atheist and a dyslexic have in common?"

One of his father's jokes. The old man believed in laughter, joking—*Best cure for a broken heart is a broken funny bone.*

(Matthew) Smith furrows his brow. (Matthew) Smith twists his mouth. "'What do an atheist and a dyslexic have in common?'—how the hell should I know?"

5.

In a voice that signals *This is funny, prepare to laugh,* (Matt) Smith asks (Matthew) Smith: "What do an atheist and a dyslexic have in common?"

(Matthew) Smith furrows his brow as if the question is profound, crucial.

"Staying up all night wondering if there's a God?"

(Matt) Smith laughs, indulgently. "No. You've got it reversed. 'Staying up all night wondering if there's a dog.'" Waits for (Matthew) Smith to laugh but (Matthew) Smith does not laugh, continues to look puzzled, vexed. "See, the joke is *dog* when people expect you to say *God*."

"But why would anyone expect you to say *God* in any case? Why is this funny? I always thought Dad's jokes were painfully unfunny."

"Dad's jokes were very funny. We all laughed."

"What do you mean, *we* all laughed? I didn't laugh."

"You did. I did."

"*I did not laugh.*"

There is a pause. Both men are agitated; neither can bring himself to look at the other.

"Anyway, the old man is dead. *That* is incontestable."

(Matthew) Smith speaks with such bitterness, (Matt) Smith decides to let this pass. To him his father was *Dad*, to this unhappy person his father was *the old man*.

The one, blessed. The other, accursed.

“The one smart thing Mom did was leave. Just—pick up, pack her things, leave.”

“When was this?” (Matt) is shocked.

“When I was at San Jose State. Should’ve spent more time with her, helping her deal with him, but—I guess …” (Matthew) Smith shrugs weakly.

“*My* mother is still alive. In a retirement village on Castille Avenue.”

(Matt) Smith speaks hesitantly. (Is his mother still alive? She has been failing, steadily. Losing her memory, as his father had lost his. Must visit her soon, before it’s too late.)

“*My* mother is still alive too. I believe.”

“When did you last see her?” (Matt) Smith is skeptical.

“Not—for a while.”

There is a pause. (Matt) Smith feels a quiver of righteousness, indignation.

“Our lives have swerved in different directions, it seems.”

To this claim—flat, blunt, accusing yet wistful—(Matthew) Smith has no reply.

After a moment (Matthew) Smith clears his throat and says suddenly, reverently, as if he has just thought of it: “Thor.”

“‘Thor’—?”

“Our dog. Big, beautiful German shepherd. …”

With a pang of grief, (Matt) Smith recalls. Silver—“Silver” had been the family dog’s name, not “Thor”—had been a German shepherd and husky mix, with a coat of myriad colors, intelligent eyes that could peer into a child’s soul. Through (Matt) Smith’s childhood Silver had been a constant companion, a protector.

“‘Silver.’ Yes. …”

Stricken to the heart, remembering. A wave of love, loss, regret, pathos. That such a beautiful, selfless creature suffused with love for him and for others should have passed from his life. …

Has to confess, his heart was broken when Silver died. Recalling how Kizer had loved Silver too; the two had wept together when the beautiful, aged dog died of kidney failure.

"… never got over …"

"… most beautiful, loving …"

"… unconditionally loving …"

(Matt) Smith is deeply moved. His disgust, anger at (Matthew) Smith begins to fade. He finds himself thinking suddenly—as if a window has been opened in an airless, closed space—that Lisa must have had postpartum depression, not diagnosed at the time. Accusing him of coercing her into having children, three children in all, when he should have known she was psychologically fragile. …

But (Matt) Smith had not known. *Had not.*

(Matthew) says, wiping at his eyes: "Kizer loved Thor too. That's why I forgave him about Lisa. A part of me wanted to murder him but then I realized I'd lose both my wife and my best friend. And by this time it was over between them, and Lisa had moved to Santa Monica. And Kizer and I have been closer than ever since."

(Matt) Smith feels another pang of jealousy. But—no: why should he be jealous of (Matthew) Smith, whose marriage has ended in divorce? Who has not the consolation of children, in middle age? In old age, to come?

No. Not jealousy, pity. Sympathy.

(Matt) Smith touches the other's wrist, not knowing what he is doing. But the gesture seems correct somehow.

Is their lunch ending? The men glance at their watches: 2:15 p.m. Kizer has never arrived.

Where is Kizer? Curiosity in their guts like something livid, living.

Their plates, half-eaten meals, are cleared away. Emptied Bloody Mary glasses, away. (Matt) Smith orders a cappuccino, and (Matthew) Smith orders coffee into which he will heap brown sugar, cream.

A warm, balmy June afternoon. Lavender wisteria in bloom, boxes of marigolds, nasturtiums, geraniums bordering the terrace café and the parking lot. Still the outdoor café is filled with diners, most of them women. (Matt) Smith glances about the terrace, oddly smiling. It's true, Kizer has failed to arrive. And yet …

In a lowered voice, as if he is speaking to (Matt) Smith conspiratorially, (Matthew) Smith says: "Remember thinking, as a kid, that the

constellations are—insects?"

"The Big Dipper is the Big Preying Mantis. The Pleiades are a necklace delicate as lace—that is, lice."

(Matthew) Smith giggles. "Weevils, beetles, palmetto bugs—all over the sky."

Hours of nighttime scrutiny, years ago. Why has no one else ever noticed? Is humankind too cowardly to confront such knowledge?

Thoughtfully (Matt) Smith says: "We have to feel that there is a creator, and this creator created us in his image. We could not bear to think that the creator is a gigantic beetle."

Never has he articulated this thought so clearly. Not even to Kizer, when they spoke as they sometimes did of abstruse philosophical matters.

Like fitting the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle into place. Or—the penultimate piece.

(Matthew) Smith says, tapping at the magazine beneath his elbow as if it had become relevant in some way, "Darwin said: 'God must have loved beetles, he made so many of them."

"Did Darwin say that?" (Matt) Smith feels a moment's resentment, that the less educated, less intelligent, and less *civilized* Smith should know something that he does not.

As in an expressionist film a shadow falls across the bright-lit table. Both men glance up, narrowing their eyes.

"Excuse me?" At their table, looming above them, is a coarse-skinned, unkempt middle-aged man, a stranger. His face is ravaged, forehead and cheeks blotched, reddened with scar tissue. Is this a homeless person, a beggar, who has forced his way onto the terrace, pushing through the wisteria, bypassing the proper entrance? (Matt) Smith has been vaguely aware of the disheveled figure making its way across the terrace, rebuffed, ignored by most of the other diners; in another minute, one of the waiters will hurry to escort him from the Purple Onion Café, directed by the frowning hostess/manager. Perhaps the disheveled man comes here often, at this time of day, from the parking lot of the restaurant, hoping to garner a few dollars before he is discovered and made to leave; except now, he seems to have been drawn to (Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith

specifically, staring at them with the frozen half smile of a paralytic. His sand-colored, graying hair has nearly receded from his oblong head, except for greasy quills that fall about his face. He wears filth-stiffened mismatched clothes and gives off a pungent odor of unwashed, despondent flesh. Behind badly smudged eyeglasses his small glassy eyes wink in a fever of hectic excitement.

Excitedly telling (Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith that they look familiar to him. "D'you think we might be related? My family used to live around here."

As if the coarse-skinned face is blindingly bright, (Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith flinch from the unkempt man.

Quickly (Matt) Smith says, reaching for the check, "No. I don't think so."

"*I* don't think so," (Matthew) Smith says, hurriedly taking out his wallet. "And anyway, lunch is over."

6.

"Well!"

"Well."

"The son of a bitch never arrived."

It is 2:23 p.m. (Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith are about to leave the Purple Onion Café. Each man is exhausted, exhilarated. Each man is deeply moved, and confused as if he has been taken up and thrown into a spinning barrel.

Each is eager to escape the other, and never see him again.

(Matthew) Smith signals to (Matt) Smith with an ominous grunt: "Look."

"Oh, Jesus."

A disheveled, homeless man has appeared on the terrace of the Purple Onion Café among the chattering women diners who are doing their best to ignore him as he drifts past their tables, pauses to lean over them, an arthritic bird of prey begging for handouts. His face is ravaged. His oblong head is near hairless, hard looking with a gunmetal sheen. The skin of his hands and forearms appears jaundiced, like oil scum on water. His body is a

sort of landslide or collapse, with thin arms, a thick torso, sagging belly. His small eyes twinkle with a kind of malicious merriment.

(Matthew) Smith whistles thinly through his big teeth.

"*He* didn't get the carcinomas treated in time, poor bastard."

(Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith observe the disheveled stranger as he makes his way toward them. Sights them, stares in disbelief, scratches at his neck. Curiosity like raw hunger in the ravaged face.

"Excuse me? Hey—d'you know me?"

"No …"

"N-no."

But the stranger is looking so yearning, neither (Matt) Smith nor (Matthew) Smith has the heart to send him away, and so he joins them at their table.

His name, it turns out, is—*Maynard*.

Last name—*Smith*.

(Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith have to laugh; this name is both preposterous and inevitable.

Reluctantly they introduce themselves to (Maynard) Smith—(*Matt) Smith*, *(Matthew) Smith*. There are no handshakes for neither (Matt) Smith nor (Matthew) Smith can bear to grasp (Maynard) Smith's (filthy) hand.

(Maynard) Smith appears disoriented like one who has journeyed a long distance. He tells the men that he is forty-nine years old, no family, no place to stay in San Rafael though he has a bed in a halfway house in San Francisco near the parole office.

Parole. They will inquire about *parole*, though not immediately.

(Matt) Smith asks (Maynard) Smith point-blank: is he waiting for Kizer too?

(Maynard) Smith recoils, baring his teeth. His voice is a guttural growl: "Kizer! Why would you ask about *him*?"

"Are you waiting for him? We were."

(Maynard) Smith looks from one man to the other. Disfigured face, sunken eyes. Broken and stained teeth. His nostrils are distended, enormous. His breath smells sepulchral. He stares at them as if there is some joke here he should grasp but can't, quite.

"You know that he—him—it's his—'death day' today—like a birthday except it's when you die. …"

"'Death day'? Kizer? Kizer is dead?" (Matthew) Smith is disbelieving.

"'Anniversary' is the word. What I meant to say. Today—June 9. I saw the date on a newspaper."

"But—Kizer is not …"

"… not dead. He *is not*."

(Maynard) Smith appears to be hard of hearing, or in any case does not hear the others' protests or register their alarm. He tells them that it is his first day back in San Rafael in nineteen years; he'd been released from San Quentin just two days before. His laughter lacerates the ears, the very air, like gravel being roughly shoveled. Rubs his bloodshot eyes with his fists as if he'd like to gouge them out.

"He provoked me—fucking Kizer. It was Kizer or me. They called it 'second-degree murder' but I know better—*he* knew better. If I hadn't done what I did I'd be dead now. *He'd* be here." (Maynard) Smith pauses, drawing a deep, tremulous breath. His small, mean eyes glance about, seeking food, drink.

"So I'm alone now, I have no friend, no family—nothing except my life." (Maynard) Smith enunciates *life* as one might enunciate *worm*.

(Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith glance at each other, trying to absorb what this apparition has told them.

Kizer is *dead*? Today, June 9, is Kizer's *death day*?

Seeing that (Matt) Smith and (Matthew) Smith seem to be struck dumb, (Maynard) Smith speaks harshly yet with a kind of grim satisfaction. His large, dark nostrils contract and expand as he breathes; his very being exudes an air of the grave. As he speaks, he picks up a small cucumber slice, a small swig of parsley, from (Matt) Smith's cold salmon platter, left behind on the tabletop by the careless waiter, and shoves them into his mouth.

"Fucking shadow over my life. Since we were boys. Everything I did has turned out wrong. Mark of Cain on my forehead. So many times I've explained, tried to explain. I didn't have the strength to save myself. *He* had to. That was our secret. I wasn't a strong swimmer. In fact, I was a poor

swimmer. My arms had no muscle. My legs were skinny. I was panicked. I clung to the canoe, he had to pry my fingers from it. I was paralyzed. … So many times I've explained, and no one will believe me. I wasn't the one who capsized the fucking canoe. *He* was."

Soldier's Handbook

William Lychack

The gun we found was an M1911. This was the standard-issue sidearm for the United States military from 1911 to 1986—World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam—and, as such an integral part of a soldier's life, it only made sense that every essential of this weapon would be laid out in great, almost loving detail in the *Basic Field Manual of the United States Armed Forces*.

Prepared under the direction of the Department of War, *The Soldier's Handbook* (as it was also known) had a singular purpose: "To give the newly enrolled member of the United States Army a convenient and compact source of basic military information and thus to aid him to perform his duties most efficiently." There were chapters on *INSIGNIA AND CLOTHING*, *MILITARY DISCIPLINE*, *THE MARCH*, *THE CAMP*, *THE BIVOUAC*, *THE USE OF MAPS*, *THE SECURITY OF SMALL GROUPS*. There were photos and illustrations, checklists and forms for a young recruit, all in one pocket-sized paperback. There were spaces at the front to record a *SOLDIER'S NAME*, *SERIAL NUMBER*, *RIFLE NUMBER*, *CHIEF BENEFICIARY* (*SIX MONTHS' PAY*), blank pages near the back for *LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT*. Scattered throughout were common-sense reminders, bits of fatherly advice—*be loyal*, *be alert*, *be determined*, *be a member of the team*—but by far the bulk of the manual was devoted to *ARMS AND EQUIPMENT*.

Diagrams, instructions, warnings, all of this waiting in a strongbox in my childhood room. What I'm trying to say is, I had an old metal footlocker with my father's papers and letters and bills under my bed growing up. I had his canceled checks, his medical records, his window-washing receipts, pocketknife, car keys, wallet. I had a packet of half-used mint-flavored toothpicks, a neatly folded certificate for marksmanship from the United

States Marine Corps, and that copy of his *Basic Field Manual*, those gray and pulpy pages, and this figure of the gun waiting there for me all along:

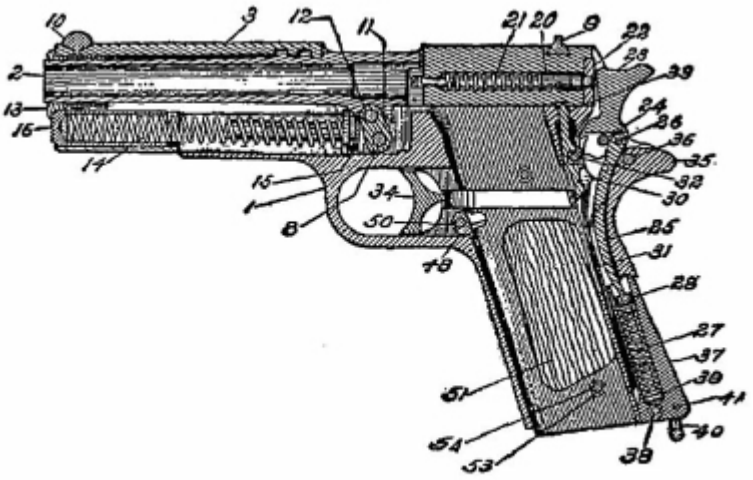


FIGURE 13.—Longitudinal section of pistol, showing component parts in assembled position.

Simple, reliable, the M1911 weighed just under three pounds unloaded, its magazine holding seven rounds. *CARE OF PISTOL—To prevent wear and tear on the working parts of your pistol, metal parts should be cleaned and covered with a thin, uniform coat of oil. • A dirty, dry pistol will have stoppages that may make it useless in battle. • A failure of your pistol in battle may cost you your life. • Do not assume that you or your companions are safe.*

What I mean to say is, I never really knew my father. I met him twice before he died when I was ten. I remember going to the farm with my mother. They had divorced when I was two. A cow stepped on my foot that first visit. My father—this man I barely even had as an *idea*—he rummaged an old Indian hatchet from some pile of junk to stop my crying.

Somewhere along the line as a kid I'd gotten it into my head that the more you used a blade, the sharper it would become. I must have wanted this tomahawk from my father to be a razor, because I started chipping branches that had fallen from the trees in the yard. I sat on the steps of the porch and unraveled the decorative tassels. I made quick work of those long strips of leather, chopping them into neat little ant-sized pieces. Of all

possible moments, this would be what I would most remember: the man appearing at the screen door, staring down to ask what have I got there, and this boy—me—I'm offering up these tiny bits of leather in the cup of my palm. Just that cringe on my father's face as he turned away, door standing dark and empty. Just me on the porch alone with that hatchet again.

Our second visit wouldn't go much better. There'd be beagle puppies out in the barn. I'd accidentally let them loose to chase after the chickens, my favorite puppy of the litter slipping between the bales of hay. You could hear her yelping from deep in the crevice, and bale by bale my father had to break down nearly the entire hayloft to rescue the dog. An afternoon's work for him, and I had to wonder if everything I touched would go bad like this. I had to feel I might be somehow cursed.

My mother and I would never see my father again after this—pulmonary embolism, living-room couch, bowl of melted ice cream on his lap—and in the parking lot of the funeral home that summer my uncle gave me whatever things my father had with him when he died. His wallet, his keys, the papers in his room, all in a small metal locker, the size of a baby's coffin.

Rarely did I think about my father as I was growing up—and already *that was a lie*—the more difficult truth was that each drip of faucet, every light bulb going dead, always my father's hand we could feel in these things, my mother convinced she could hear him in the rooms, his ghost lurking outside the window.

Sometimes, on nights I couldn't sleep, I'd lie in bed just so alert to the dark. It had a kind of viscous quality, the night, a black plushness that got increasingly difficult to breathe. From out of this my father emerged as a creak of floor near the bed. All the shadows in their right places, everything appearing perfectly natural, yet somehow he stood there in the dark. He moved so quiet in the watery black of the room, the man inching slowly toward me.

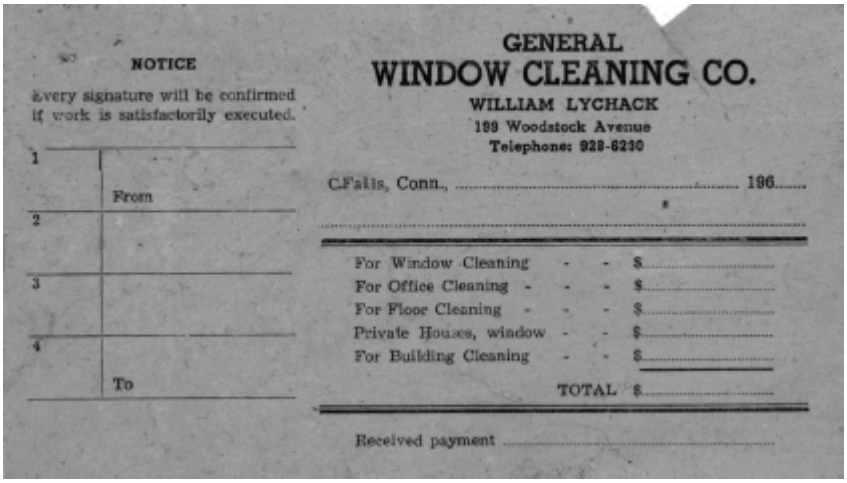
Not a friendly visit. Not there to comfort anyone. He never arrived to give solace or relief. My father more just that empty volume waiting for me, and then that hand on the back of my neck. Not hard, not heavy, but not

exactly lifting either, just this strange and steady pressure that I knew to be him, the hair on my arms going electric. I'd get myself nice and riled up like this. I'd stare my eyes raw with the traffic light outside my window. That steady throb of red on the street. And soon I would lose patience with myself. Always the reading light to turn on—room snapping back to shape—and me listening for my mother sleeping, that rolling into shore of her breathing. Nights like this I got up and checked my collections, my shells, my acorns, my interesting pebbles and bottle caps and old antique nails and pull tabs. I took books from the shelves or baseball cards from their piles, the piles sorted by team, the teams sorted by player position. I dawdled over some little project halfway built on the desk—an airplane model, a cardboard gas station—and then that strongbox under the bed would occur to me, as if I had completely forgotten it existed.

I'd slide it out into the light. I'd open the latch—that stale tang of metal—and that would be my father for me, a thick taste of tin and old papers, my fingers leafing through the letters. I had that hunger I didn't know I had until I reached the bottom of the box. There'd be my father in the bills, the checks, numbers added on the back of an envelope, a scribbled street address, doctor's appointment, smudge of fingerprints—all the debris of his life I picked over like specks of meat from a bone—the loose buttons and coins at the bottom, the wooden matches, the car keys and dog tags, and then always those black-and-white photos: my mother and father at the farm (late afternoon light, front porch); my father as a young man sitting with his parents (young prowl of man in his service uniform, cap pushed back off his face, his mother holding him down with her elbow); this man asleep in a chair with a baby on his chest (me staring out wide-awake); and so on.

I never meant to become my mother about such things, but it would be hard not to want to find meaning in these objects. I must have learned from her how to select omens, like they were tiny seeds to encourage, all the accidents turning out to have been on purpose.

The *Basic Field Manual of the United States Armed Forces* would be waiting for us when we found the gun. It would be lying under my bed long after it could have done anyone any good. I'd find it years too late, yet still I must have wanted it to be my father who placed it there as a message for me. Every time I opened that old metal box of leftover junk, it'd seem something new would appear to me, some fresh detail I had never noticed before, as though he was trying to arrange things for me to see, leaving papers and relics, little hints or anachronisms, a new postmark, a fresh pack of chewing gum, a dollar bill in his wallet from two years beyond his death.



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I knew this wasn't possible. Not for a single moment would I have believed, if someone just told me anything like this, but then that cold brush of fear in my room at night to explain. The way I simply knew his presence by the door. No one could have convinced me it wasn't my father standing there. No one could have lifted that away from me.

Later, when I was older, my mother would tell me that she and my father would make love while I was outside playing at the farm. The creaking porch, the blackness of the windows, the cows in the fields, and my mother and father leaving me alone like that for what seemed such a long time. What was a person supposed to do with that sort of knowledge, my mother and father in the house together? Or the fact that my father (him with that sweepstakes smile) would die, of all days, on my mother's birthday? Or that he'd have my school photos in his wallet when he died? How were all these details supposed to lie still? How was all of this supposed to fit together?

How could I *not* want to find meaning in a neatly folded certificate for marksmanship from the United States Marine Corps? A Mercury dime, a window-cleaning receipt—didn't their mere survival make them somehow significant? Was there any way to just open that *Basic Field Manual* and ignore that sense of my father directing me? How would I not hear the man's voice in that, my father trying to tell me something through the pages of the handbook, if only I could listen somehow harder?

Do not leave a loaded weapon where someone else may unknowingly pick it up. • Keep the safety lock on at all times, particularly when advancing, as you may catch your trigger in brush and kill yourself or your comrade. • Never point a weapon at anyone unless you intend to kill him.

Infidels

Joanna Scott

It was a damp November afternoon in Paris in 1887 when the man who would be identified in the book only as “C” suffered the first symptoms of the affliction that would make him noteworthy. He had risen from his nap and settled comfortably into his armchair by the window overlooking the Place des Vosges. Droplets from the thick fog ran like tears down the exterior of the glass. A wood fire crackled and filled the room with its soothing fragrance.[1]

Long married but with no heirs, recently retired from a position as director of a champagne export business, C did not lack for friends. He and his wife dined out most evenings, and he was an active member of the Société de Géographie. But C also guarded his solitude and spent most of his afternoons alone in his library. He was well educated and fluent in several languages. He longed to author something of his own but didn’t know how to begin. He was secretly critical of contemporary men of letters and blamed novelists, especially, for pandering to the public and emptying their work of useful information. The worst of them, in his opinion, was Victor Hugo, who used to live in an apartment across the square. C had read a couple of novels and a book of verse by his former neighbor. He wasn’t inclined to read more. He wasn’t at all curious. What was there to be curious about if there was nothing to learn? He had read enough to reach the verdict that the whole of Hugo’s oeuvre was overrated.

In general, he preferred reading biographies and military histories. On this particular day in 1887, we find him reading a volume he’d purchased for a few francs from a bookseller near the Pont Marie. It was an English edition about the Crusades, and C was reading with interest about the disorder in the ranks of the early Christian pilgrims.[2]

"… The vulgar, both the great and small, were taught to believe every wonder, of lands flowing with milk and honey," he read.

"… Their ignorance of the country, or war, and discipline, exposed them to every snare," he read.

"… A pyramid of bones informed their companions of the place of their defeat," he read, and he continued to read the sentence stating that "three hundred thousand perished before a single city was rescued from the"—

And then he stopped, or was stopped, as if he had run with his eyes closed into a brick wall. His eyes were wide-open, but he couldn't read the word that followed in the sentence. The word was *infidels*. It should have been a familiar word to C even if he hadn't been entirely fluent in English, since it was nearly identical in French: *infidèles*. He knew the word in English just as he knew it in French. He knew it in Latin and Spanish. Really, it should have been easy enough for C to comprehend. Yet, to his dismay, the word was utterly unintelligible. His eyes processed the letters in their correct order. His brain received the information in the usual fashion. He inhaled, and his oxygenated blood flowed briskly. All organs were seemingly in working order, and C was very much awake, utterly sober and self-aware, but the eight letters of that English word were as devoid of meaning as if he had never learned to read.

It's true that many of us have experienced the odd momentary sensation when a simple word is suddenly unrecognizable. Scientists call this phenomenon "semantic satiation" and explain it as a result of overuse of a specific neural pattern. They hypothesize that intense repetition of a specific word creates a reactive inhibition, slowing the neural activity associated with the meaning of that word. We can read the word *want*, for instance, without difficulty. But reading it over and over interferes with comprehension: *want want want want want want want want want want want want want want want want*.[3]

This, however, was not what C experienced that day in 1887. He didn't perceive the word as a familiar one that he'd once known. The letters were so unrecognizable that *infidel* wasn't even a word to him. It was a solid blankness, a splotch of spilled ink, an absolute nothing.

He removed his spectacles, rubbed them with his handkerchief, and returned them to his face. The one printed word he didn't recognize became two, and two seeped into a sentence. He squinted and shifted in his chair. He opened the window shade. He tried to reread the preceding paragraph. With relief, he experienced some recognition: he knew what *pyramid* signified, and *bones*, and *defeat*. Yes, he knew what each of those words meant, thank God. *Pyramid*, *bones*, *defeat*.

Awareness was painfully brief. *Py ... ra ..., bo ... n ..., defe ... a ...* It was as if the light within each letter went out one by one, until each word was dark.

With rising concern, he turned to words in his native language. He tried and failed to read the front page of the newspaper that lay open on his desk. The titles of the books on his shelves were unintelligible. He couldn't even read the name printed on his own stationery.

Naturally, he would go on to consult his doctor. His doctor would refer him to a specialist, who would study him with interest and publish his case history. That C retained his speaking fluency gave the scientific community much to ponder. If you had conversed with him, you wouldn't have seen signs of his impairment, which affected only his perception of printed words. In other ways, he lived a normal life.

For our purposes, however, it is enough to know that once C fully lost his ability to read, he never recovered it. I won't even bother telling you about his first appointment with his doctor. What concerns us here is C's adventure that day after he decided that all he needed was a good, brisk walk around the square to clear his confused mind.

Back in 1981, when I was a student studying in Paris, I used to make my way to the Place des Vosges to get away from the bustle of the city. I remember how the streams of clear water gushed from the mouths of stone lions in the central fountain, and the groomed lawns bordered by metal wickets looked as perfect as if they'd been painted green. Linden trees grew in stately rows. An artificial hush seemed to mute the noise of traffic on the adjacent streets, as if a volume dial had been adjusted.

It was a warm spring that year, and I would sit on a bench and enjoy the sunlight on my face. One day, I fell into conversation with an old woman who was feeding crumbs to the pigeons. She saw my backpack and identified me as an American. She asked if I liked Paris. I said I liked it very much. She asked if I liked the Place des Vosges. I said I thought it was beautiful. Though the sky was clear, the woman wore a tan raincoat that was oversized on her small frame. Her cheeks had the deep creases of boots that had gone unworn for decades. She was eager to talk, and I was glad to have the chance to practice my French. When she asked, out of the blue, if I believed in ghosts, I said, "Oui, madame," just to play along.

And so it was from this old woman that I learned something about the bloody history of the Place des Vosges. Long ago, she explained to me as she tore off pinches of bread to toss to the birds, the large square was occupied by the Palais des Tournelles, named for numerous turrets that decorated its rim. It was here, in the courtyard of the palace, that Henri II was wounded in a tilting match with the Duke of Montgomery, whose spear splintered against the king's visor, sending shards through his eyes and into his brain. The king suffered for eleven days in painful agony before finally dying. In mourning, his wife, Catherine de' Medici, ordered the palace to be destroyed.

This is where a ghost enters the story: the old woman claimed the Place des Vosges was haunted by Henri II. I asked her whether she had ever seen the king herself. "*Bien sûr!*" she said. It was impossible to predict when he would make an appearance. Some said he came on the nights when Venus was closest to earth while others maintained that he could be seen during a lunar eclipse, or on the anniversary of his death, or birth, or marriage. He would appear in his armor suit walking slowly across the grass to the fountain. He would remove his helmet with his broken visor and dip his hands into the water being spit out by one of the stone lions. He would wash the blood from his face, then he would put his helmet back on and walk away.

The old woman was fourteen years old when she had first seen the king on her way home from a tavern where she worked sweeping the floors. She had seen him three times since then. With a theatrical grimace, she tried to

convey how frightening he was to behold. When her lips peeled back, I saw that she was missing several upper molars.

I didn't bother to wait around to see if the ghost of Henri II would make his entrance that evening. It had become increasingly obvious to me that the woman was suffering from senility. I could only hope that she was receiving adequate care. As for me, though I appreciate a good ghost story, I thought I could tell the difference between fiction and fact—until I stumbled across the story of C.

My sense of C is that he was even more of a skeptic than yours truly. He must certainly have been aware of the square's history, but superstition made him impatient. And though he was a dutiful Catholic and went to confession once a week, he much preferred forms of knowledge that could be verified. When in doubt, he would always side with duplicable proof. As for human attempts to expose the secrets of mortality, he believed that the truth was visible in every corpse: you could see just by looking at a man without a heartbeat that death was the end of life. There was no world elsewhere. C was convinced that heaven and hell existed only as imagined places. His pragmatic mind had no room for phantoms.

The fog that had settled over the city of Paris the day C lost his ability to read was so dense, and the winter dusk had come so early, that he could barely make out the outlines of the tall buildings across the square. He felt the unnerving sensation of being lost, though he knew exactly where he was. He resisted the urge to grab the arm of a woman who was walking ahead of him along the gravel path. Feathers sticking up from the bulb of her hat shook in the swirling mist. C gasped, mistaking the feathers for a live bird. He took a few steps backward and would have stumbled, but luckily his hand found the iron handle of a bench. He lowered himself onto the seat. With a few deep breaths, he was able to calm his agitation.

The quiet of the square had a restorative effect, and he began to appreciate the effect of the fog on the scenery. It would have been fine weather for spectral illusions. C smiled at the thought. Of course he'd heard the silly stories about Henri II. He enjoyed the feeling of superiority that overcame him when he considered how susceptible other people were to

superstition, how easily they would mistake a tree trunk, blurred by the heavy cloud, for the ghost of a dead king.

He tipped his head back and closed his eyes. Voices of passersby seemed to come from far away. He could almost fancy that he was at the seashore. He found himself remembering the sensation he'd loved so much when he was a young boy and let the gentle waves wash the sand over his toes.

A nearby cough had the startling effect of shattering glass. C blinked. That's when he noticed the man at the opposite end of the bench. He didn't know how long the man had been there—probably he had just arrived. He wore an old-fashioned sack suit with a tailcoat that was unbuttoned, revealing a plaid vest and the froth of a white ruffled shirt. His black cravat was tied in a bow and brushed against the rough curls of his white beard. He had a pencil out and was writing on a piece of paper. His expression had the fixed aspect of a statue and gave little indication of his thoughts. From C's perspective, there was an air of loneliness about the man, a perfuse, sad loneliness that kept him helplessly sealed off from the rest of humanity.

C tried not to stare. There was something familiar about the stranger; a moment of reflection brought clear identification as C recognized his former neighbor, Victor Hugo. Victor Hugo!

But that was impossible—Victor Hugo was dead. He had been dead for two years. C had been inconvenienced by the author's huge funeral procession in front of the Panthéon.

Oh, but it was him, there was no denying. Victor Hugo, buried in a tomb he shared with Zola and Dumas, was sitting beside C on an iron bench in the Place des Vosges. C was overtaken by a clarity of mind that came in stark contrast to the confusion he'd experienced earlier. He could no longer find meaning in printed words, but he could see reality for what it was.

Hugo brought the back of his hand to his mouth and coughed again. He was old and haggard, but his poor health couldn't stop him from scribbling on the paper. C felt a wave of pity for Hugo and wanted to reach out to him and tell him … what? What could he possibly say? He searched his memory for a passage from one of Hugo's verses. Instead, a scene from the famous early novel about the hunchback came to mind. He remembered the passage almost word for word. He remembered how Djali, the little pet goat of La

Esmeralda, gets his horns tangled in the folds of a noblewoman's dress. C's heart ached as he thought of all the ugly, contemptuous aristocrats mocking La Esmeralda, calling her a witch and ordering her to make the goat perform a feat of magic.

C wasn't prone to sentimentality, but who could resist when the actors on the page were so vividly rendered? It occurred to him that he had judged Hugo's work too harshly through the years. His inclination to find faults had dominated his reading experience. He realized that in his urge to be critical, he had missed the sheer, absorbing pleasure of Hugo's books. Why, he had only to gaze at the sad, decrepit ghost beside him and realize that the stories he'd left behind would survive the eroding effects of time. Centuries would pass, and the books would continue to be read … though not by C, since C could no longer read.[4]

Awareness filled him with horror. He would never again be able to read about La Esmeralda disentangling Djali's horns from Madame Aloïse's dress! He didn't need a doctor to examine him to conclude with absolute certainty that his impairment was permanent. Printed words forever on would be impenetrable. If he wanted to read, he would have to be read to. It wasn't the same when the words were spoken aloud. No, it wasn't at all the same as digesting words visually and letting them transport him far from his armchair into a world illuminated by the light of his solitary consciousness. He had failed to fully savor the distinct satisfaction that comes with reading selflessly, propelled by selfless interest. All through his adult life, when his intellect was at its sharpest, he had positioned himself in competition with the books in his library. Now it was too late to start over. He had missed his chance.

Casting a sorrowful glance at C, Victor Hugo stood, fluffed out the tails of his coat, and walked away. C resisted calling out to him. He watched silently as the ghost dissolved in the mist. After Victor Hugo had disappeared entirely, C bravely fought against despair and invited a return of cold common sense. He told himself that he had imagined the whole encounter. There had been no ghost. He said it over and over to himself: There had been no ghost!

He would have been persuaded if he hadn't seen, beside him on the bench, the piece of paper Victor Hugo had left behind. C was reluctant to pick it up. It would cause him too much distress, since he wouldn't be able to read what Hugo had written. It would only be painful to peruse the scrawl of ink and fail to make sense of it. Hugo had probably written something brilliant; C would never know. He would leave the paper there. He would not allow himself to be tormented. But an unusual curiosity overtook him, and he gingerly lifted a corner of the paper.

It took extra scrutiny in the dim light to realize he was looking not at words but at a drawing. At first it seemed a busy patterned design, flowers tumbling behind a web, but with further consideration he came to see the circles, one dark, one hollow, that represented eyes, and a grim, skewed oval of a mouth lined with monstrous teeth, and wisps of a beard trailing like Medusa's snakes. C finally recognized in the image the shape of a ghostly face, dissolving into a net of lines, as if printed on lace.

Victor Hugo had left behind a drawing. This was his gift to C, who from that day on could no longer read but could still see with perfect clarity. In the picture Victor Hugo had made in C's presence, C saw the self-portrait of the very ghost with whom he had shared the bench. It did not take much effort to see that the illustration succeeded in capturing all the mysterious brilliance of the artist on a single sheet of paper. He was filled with admiration and at the same time he perceived in the image the full imaginative depths he'd missed in the previous years. It felt as if he were looking through ice at a spectacular underwater garden.

The effect of the drawing was so disorienting that in the days to come C would put it in a drawer, out of sight. Anyway, medical examinations and experimental treatments would keep him so busy he wouldn't have time for anything else. He decided that rather than leave the drawing to languish in his desk, he would donate it to the city of Paris. When the Victor Hugo Museum was established on the Place des Vosges in 1902, it would be displayed among the author's papers in a second-floor gallery. It remains there to this day. I know, for I have seen it myself.

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[1]I came across the story of C when I was browsing at a used bookstore in Ithaca. I read the case history while standing in the aisle. Stupidly, I left without purchasing the book. When I returned for it later, the book was gone. I don't recall the title. C's story, however, left an indelible impression in my mind.

[2]The book C was reading consisted of late chapters extracted from Edward Gibbon's classic work and republished in a pocket edition titled simply *The Crusades*. I have checked the quotes for accuracy.

[3]One study has gone so far as to suggest that the recent dramatic uptick in this phenomenon is due to the simplification of writing necessitated by mobile devices. Smaller screens demand a smaller vocabulary, increasing both our exposure to a smaller number of words and the concurrent increase in semantic satiation. See Leonardo, T.; Pissoralüpa, S.; Merendeskewski, J. M. 2018. Neurosemantic Frequency Patterning in ERP DHA Measured Outcomes. *The Journal of Neuromorphological Studies*. 1752(2–3):132–145.

[4]C was probably wrong about the survival of Victor Hugo's books. Predictive patterns based on data by Leonardo et al. (ibid.) indicate that by the year 2150, the majority of the human species will be illiterate.

Idylls of Curiosity

Catherine Imbriglio

IN CASE YOU'VE NEVER WONDERED ABOUT THE MATHEMATICS OF THE VISUAL

A worry, the determining factors in a worry. A plot of land. A meadow. How do you quantify a meadow. A meadow coalesces when overlapping plates regulate the size of a ghost admitting hole.

How is our blood pressure this morning, how many giraffes are pictured on the mug, look closely at their intertwined figures: are they tumbling or might they be copulating, how long did you say a moon needs to be fêted, have you heard from any hecklers lately, do they have probable cause for calling me sexually confused.

I wore this black little number, this is Ella Fitzgerald doing a Gershwin number, if you want to buy fish, the sign says take a number, this number is a retribution number, this number is a catfish number, this number is like an overheard "some people number," viz., "some people can't smell shit when it is right under their nose."

A splash. What are the factors of a splash. A splash is a product in a set of infinitely porous numbers. Is the way you heard multiplied by what you heard. Some days I hear the splash as the product of a church shooting. Some days I hear the splash as a wound-up ghost that has just unfurled.

If you are a curlicue number, you are an open-source number; if you are a fluted number, you are a grooved-coin number; if you are a closed-in number, you are a place to hide number; if you want a place to hide, you are like a nursehound number; if you are a nursehound number, you are an edible bottom-dwelling number; if you are the prey of the nursehound, you may be in for a shark number; if you "only eat Rhode Island chowder," you may be a homegrown number; if you are a homegrown number, you may be a statistically meaningless number; if you are a statistically meaningless number, you can be a naughty number; if you are a number without sin, wait until you cast the first stone.

When is the best time to pick corn, how many minutes should you cook it, do you start the cooking in cold water or do you wait until the water is boiling; if you are a retribution number, you are a billable number; if you are a billable number, how many ears did you pick and here's how much you owe; if you are obsessed with corn particulars, you are not a take what comes number; if you are not a take what comes number, how many generations of ghosts would it please you to grow.

—For Marjorie Milligan, in memoriam

(LIKE TALKING TO YOURSELF) WORD PROBLEM

How many times do you get up during the night, how much safety is there in numbers, how many stars would you give the stars in our galaxy, how many times must I remind you not to leave the front door open, how long were you up broom-chasing the bat around the room.

If poetic can be a pejorative, so can calculating, if permanence is an interesting analytic problem, so is impermanence, if mistakes often say more about intrinsic difficulties in a problem and less about fallibility, how would you rate success in becoming imperfectly clear.

How much longer must I wait for a doctor to see me, how long will you be a dodger of persuasive questions, how many times must they report a similar shooting, how much snow was predicted for this past season, how many times have I looked up the number of flats in the F Minor scale.

If I say this is your last chance would you like me to mean it, which follow-up opinions on the initial opinion deserve a like sign, would you give me thumbs-up for the word ordinals in this sequence, do you still suppose the ability to lie indicates psychological maturity, are you still fond of eating fashionable kale.

Quick, how many great-great-grandmothers does a person have, how many couples have remained childless, how many of your teeth have gone missing; how many times do I have to tell you, Woman-in-Row-34, stop talking on your cell phone for all of us to hear.

What is a problem set, what is the set of problem children, what is the set of animals who can do mimicry, how much of our liking is "statistical correctness," how many stars are there in the universe, how many times has the likely number fallen on deaf ears.

ALL BETS ARE OFF ALGORITHM

Pretend nobody sees you, or maybe nobody does see you, assume your tripping then falling, nobody witnessed, pray the heckler doesn't sniff out your risk aversions, kid yourself that opaqueness is a sycamore to hide behind, all to flesh out the in-betweens of your shadow flicker, such that sleep is in, cordgrass on the rise, the size of your universe more than the sum of a dawdling x plus y: (x) how long until the moon and ghost of yourself come round to one another, (y) how long until you are given in consequence to the great blue heron with the prying eyes.

The problem is, the problem was.

A horseshoe crab, a slide rule, a sinking in the mud. Those involuntary muscles around the mouth. A fateful merger like the one with the great blue heron we have been holding off.

Shall we sleep tonight, will we be thrilled with the sheep we have counted, will we be thrilled if on the dream stage our social inhibitions have started fooling around.

The (un)expected frequency of coincidence. Words you mean and don't mean at the same time. Tide tabler. Wheelhouse. A gambling on correlation as far away as the heckler will allow.

Here's to your risk tolerance. Here's to your helicopter ride.

What is the probability a new moon implies an assignation, what is the chance the carousel will be open, what is the likelihood that anything can be assigned a number, what is the probability the young husband will be dead in the morning, what is the chance you'll assume responsibility for the implications of your utterance, what are the odds you'll go forth evasive, into fields with the grasses overgrown, what are the odds the word of the day will be visibility, what is the probability that the woman with the dog goes back to an empty home.

We were scolding, we were being scolded, were we likening fast talkers to bites by annoying insects, were we telling the poison ivy off. Am I approaching senescence. Am I less than once upon a time. Whether or not we have been faithful to the cumulative words we have spoken, were we hoping we could be charitable, were we hoping our words would be statistical irritants when tossing associative logic around.

Hide then go seek. Your body against my body. The success of poetic conversion is or is not equal to the entertainment quotient of the event x putting your money down.

THE WOMAN CORRESPONDS TO A PROJECTIVE GEOMETRY, THE WOMAN CORRESPONDS TO THE KNOTS IN HER HAIR

Sometimes in my dreams I descend four flights without ever touching a stair. Or on pavement I take one step and glide 406 feet, step, then glide again, a periodic walking on air. Outside the picture plane, the figure is moved to tears by a transformation of the object. What properties are invariant under projective mappings. If you put down “bleep” on paper, what part remains from the actual bleep. What parts are preserved if you shrink a heckler or a pear. In the reality plane, I had to scramble to write down a sigh word. At the last second my gamboling is curtailed. The power is out, so there’s no light pollution. Still, in the dark, pulling nine carrots from the earth is a bleeping experience. She learns to bleep by herself while studying knot theory. A bowline knot is like a throat knot, a panic knot is like matted hair. It’s no big deal, this putting two and two together, like transference, like equating a sight line with elephants or bears.

NOTE. “Assume responsibility for the implications of your utterance” is borrowed from Stanley Cavell.

(SHE FOR ONE) WORD PROBLEM

If he pulls the red sled for two miles and she for one, how long will it take to get them home? For there are drifts and there are hills. Use just your words to solve, as the girl would do for birds in the air, birds on the ground. The wind is strong, the house talks back, with loud, such loud house sounds. Shake. Thud. Thud. Crack, shake. Groan. In back of the house, there is a cove. The cove is iced, with snow on top of that, in folds and folds the wind has sown. The ducks are gone, the gulls are gone, small stream where they would sleep or feed, the ice shut down. In cold like this, your breath feels blue. Or you could paint it blue, as you would to show the drifts that shape the snow. They reach a fence and turn. The snow still drifts, the drifts get deep, one hour’s passed. Child hands, child feet, they must be

cold. Do you think the math that made this up will find a path to speed them home? Here is the bean soup I made for them. For at least two hours I have kept it warm. More than a bowl for each to eat. So tell me now: have they come back? Boy. Girl. Birds of the air, birds of the ground.

BIRD AS ALMOST ALGORITHM

Instead of calling something facile until it becomes facile: magnitude and direction; instead of calling something principled until it becomes principled: words that defy numb(ers); instead of dividing the present into its tense: occupy: breeze multiples; instead of the creed-spackled: a hummingbird; instead of your heartbeat: its heartbeat; instead of shortage narratives: share with the bird: nectar; instead of mistakes unforgivable, mistakes forgivable; instead of trash talk: tune managements; instead of disintegrating voiceprints: ghost feathers; instead of P beware Q: boo at: mutant statistics; instead of an updown wing beat: a figure eight wing beat: instead of jumping to solution (x): hover like the bird (y), siphoning backward to it; instead of "the winner is": drag and lift measurements; instead of not Black Lives Matter: black lives matter; instead of what a number means to itself: mean like ghost-birds: they be: in ever widening: numbers.

—For Michael S. Harper, in memoriam

THE WOMAN FEINTS AT MATHEMATICAL NOTATION

Let lambda stand for wavelengths of light, earth absorption. Let lambda stand for the way light changes direction, bounces off bodies or bends, in or around objects. Let theta represent the way the woman likes the sound of lambda, bending or bouncing. Let iota mean the way her eyes know numbers as a form of light insurance, underwriting lambda bending or bouncing, underwriting lambda being absorbed. It follows then, idylls of curiosity. It follows, her figuring in a coast equation, with variables

signifying dearly departed soils. Convincing the administration to value light insurance feels like convincing the moon it must be proved. The cabinet secretary keeps insisting on a rider for curiosity liability. The woman doesn’t tell him curiosity liability is a fabulous tool.

Once More to the Beach

Dave King

For roughly twelve years in the 1960s and ’70s, a cruise ship rose from the banks of a wetland outside the town of Kodiak, Alaska. White and black and baby blue with orange accents, she might have washed ashore in the tsunami that followed the great Good Friday earthquake of 1964—though that wasn’t the case. Across Mission Road lay a slim arc of stony beach from which a single small deli and the mass of the ship were the only signs of habitation; all else was fir trees and mist, a small, wild promontory covered in conifers and the island coastline diminishing to the east.

By day the gravel lot surrounding the boat was quiet, but at night it pulsed with the beat of rock music, audible even from the stony beach across the road. In the darkness around the boat’s awninged entrance, couples quarreled or threw up whatever they’d consumed or headed to the beach to neck, and all night long vehicles arrived and departed, parking every whichway. Headlights careened up the unpaved beach road; pickups got forsaken by drivers too blind to drive. And inside the place: patrons of live music on the topmost deck or of the women (plus one transvestite) who charged by the hour in staterooms a flight down, patrons of the dealers, who were never hard to find. Fishermen and cannery workers and God-fearing locals seeking out old friends. Seeking a buzz, seeking a warm body, a party, a blast of ecstatic bass, seeking a fight over something unknowable. Seeking a chance to show off, seeking another round after the town bars had shut. Seeking diversion after weeks at sea with a small crew in close quarters, seeking the sublime or whatever passed for it.

This was the Beachcombers, one of Alaska’s notorious watering holes at a time when the exultant chaos of the era was compounded by a frontier sensibility not yet in air quotes. (Also by the flush of a boom time: oil and fish.) Down those dim and funky gangways—the Little Bar on the lower

deck, staterooms in the middle, and the big boisterous joyous loud dance hall on the promenade deck above—the boat was a haven for wild guys and tough gals and various miscreants, including me. And in the fall of last year, decades after its closing, the Beachcombers held a reunion.

Actually, the Beachcombers was three successive establishments, all at the same spot on Mission Road, alongside swampy Potatopatch Lake and just one convenient lot beyond Kodiak city limits. The first structure was a log cabin built in 1933 and operated as a whites-only joint until ’57, when Navy airman Legs LeGrue took it over, renaming it the Beachcombers and letting everyone in. The Beachcombers roadhouse featured cheap drinks and live music, grill food and recreational fistfights until Good Friday 1964, when that tsunami surged over much of southern Alaska, destroying whole towns and killing 139 people. Raymond LeGrue, Legs’s son, was fourteen at the time and remembers standing on Pillar Mountain, up above the town, watching the sea wash through the family’s new house while his dad spoke by radio to the crew of a fishing boat swept on a wave up East Rezanof Drive. The log cabin was borne into Potatopatch Lake and deemed unsalvageable.

In the wake of the disaster, most Kodiak business owners tossed up the shed structures that characterize the town today, but Legs and his wife, Edie, had more glamorous plans. Spending $90,000 of Alaska relief funds, they purchased the sixty-two-stateroom *Princess Norah*, which had sailed the inland waterway for some thirty-five years. With the engines removed to lighten the load, the big boat was towed to Kodiak and, one night in December of ’64, a channel was dug across Mission Road and the steamship floated in on the year’s highest tide. It took two tugboats, three bulldozers, and a bunch of guys manning skiffs, but by morning a gravel lot had been filled in around the hull, and Mission Road had been restored. This is not mere gonzo legend; a state proclamation issued at Legs’s death confirms the details.

Legs had done aircraft ordnance in the Pacific but drew galley duty for fighting and gambling, and after the war he convinced the navy to send him to cooking school, where he was an unexpected star. It was evidently his

dream to own a nice restaurant, and when the boat opened in ’65, it was as the Beachcombers Bar and Hotel, a place with white tablecloths in the lower-deck restaurant and a menu that read *Adventurous Dining Ahead* ($4.00 crab, $7.00 filet mignon). Gentlemen diners wore sport coats to distinguish them from patrons headed upstairs, where the bar for a brief time was called the nightclub or cabaret. There was even a wine cellar down in the hold.

The SS Princess Norah*, circa 1967, after its transformation into the Beachcombers. Photograph courtesy of Ray LeGrue.*

For a few years, it seemed to work. Folks liked Legs, who’d pitched in heroically after the tsunami, serving eighteen hundred meals with a staff of high-school students and opening *Princess Norah* staterooms to locals caught without homes. Holidays especially, the place was a destination, tall

in its gravel boat basin, lifeboats dangling cheerily on its decks. The Beachcombers was a cruise ship before Kodiak saw cruise ships, but swell though the boat was, it was hard to heat and keep filled, and financially the model may have been unsustainable. When Legs was disabled by MS, the Beachcombers was sold, but in 1970 the LeGrues repossessed it for failed payments. Ray LeGrue, fresh from college, took over as manager.

By then the sixties, with their white-linen aspirations, had slouched toward the sweatier hedonism of a new decade. The interim owners had replaced the dining room with a daytime "Little Bar" containing dingy pool tables and a rotating cast of passed-out drunks, and the staterooms, managed by a sketchy guy called Diablo, rented out weekly, nightly, or hourly. The ship's blue exterior was now the scab hue of weathered Rust-Oleum, and her lifeboats, wheelhouse, and stack had been removed, leaving the stump of a liner anchored in the gravel lot. But all sorts of counterculture types were flowing north to work the pipeline and fisheries, and this shaggy coterie was Ray's generation. Drugs were plentiful, being high barely a secret. The sexual revolution was happening! Moreover, life in Alaska remained hard and intense. Work hard, play hard was the rule, and Ray knew how to throw a party. The Beachcombers bar stayed open until 5:00 a.m.

That was when I lived there, first in stateroom 6A with my best friend, Amy, then alone in a tiny green cubicle at the bow. Before I moved out, the Beachcombers was sold again, and this time when the family repossessed they found most of the equipment stripped. The furnace had disappeared, and the boat had sat empty a full winter while mold crept over the carpets and walls. In 1977 Ray LeGrue built a new building on the gravel lot, jettisoning the rooming-house element. The new Beachcombers was a place of strong drinks and live music; Bachman-Turner Overdrive played there once, drawn, so Ray said, by his grand-a-day offer. The scene lasted till '92, when he took space in town and opened Henry's Great Alaskan, using his dad's given name and decorating it with Beachcombers/*Princess Norah* memorabilia. The Beachcombers building was bought by the Salvation Army, which owns it today. The boat went for scrap.

That final brick-and-mortar incarnation had a stainless-steel dance floor and a certifiably rough crowd; a killing outside the place has never been solved. But the gold standard, as everyone knows, was the silhouette above the swamp, the great hull dark and resonant like some emulsion of dream and joke. It's the decade of the boat that makes the Beachcombers notorious, that draws the good stories and ignites something vital to Alaska's self-image. *That's* the passage that warrants reunion, and at the gathering, held over a long weekend at the Kodiak Convention Center, I asked Ray if it was more than the boatiness. Was there some other magic?

I expected some boilerplate on sex/drugs/rock 'n' roll, but Ray surprised me by growing wistful. And my question wasn't really about why the brain magnifies one memory, diminishing others, nor how we create nostalgia and wallow in reminiscence, but what was there in the first place. What combo of sparks, amounting to magic? "The boat was a city," he said.

By chance, Ray LeGrue was the first person I spoke to when Amy and I entered the Beachcombers in April of '74. We were eighteen and had dropped out of freshman year in the hope of something more engaging, and in Tokyo—so we'd heard—even clueless suburban kids were getting hired as English tutors, so Tokyo was our goal. But we wound up in Kodiak, working at a cannery and seeking cheap housing because the employee bunkhouse took only men. On the crab line an authoritarian local woman told Amy, "Well, *cheapest* would be the Beachcombers, but, dear, that's the *last* place I'd send a nice couple!" so we headed there right after work, and in the Little Bar two guys were passed out on tall stools. A big fellow with a mop of brown hair and a bushy mustache was washing glasses, and this was Ray, still in his midtwenties.

Ray took the measure of us—feckless, untested—and told us to find Diablo, who turned out to look like the guy in Munch's *The Scream*. He said his threshold was nineteen, legal for drinking in Alaska in those days, so we lied about our ages, and in response Diablo adopted the third person: "No one fucks with Diablo!" But for twenty a week we got stateroom 6A, no bigger than a camper van, with stucco walls painted dark blue and Potatopatch Lake seething beyond a porthole. Linens were extra, the

communal bathroom down a gangway. We set our travel alarm and spread our sleeping bags on the bunk beds and were awakened by the woman next door working the midnight shift, then the 3:00 a.m. shift too.

What the hell type of reunion is suitable to such a place? Kodiak as I knew it was a town barely larger than a game of tic-tac-toe, but still Alaska's fifth largest city. It was blue-collarly proud of its last-frontier cred, yet stratified in familiar ways, and beyond a nucleus of the righteous and bossy lay a fringe element with less at stake. *That's* what was great about the Beachcombers in my day: the outpost of badness two miles from a civic center. Localized in that vessel, the private badness of longing. Of bad folks slipping out of church, bad husbands and bad wives slipping off from each other and sailors and factory workers slipping into altered states. A man in a stateroom, slipping on women's clothes; teenagers slipping away from college. The badness of being on our own at eighteen, of daring to live in a bad place among interestingly bad people, of harboring bad desires in the years before I came out and met my husband and built a life that—as with the very idea of reunion—is more like a convention center than a roadhouse. The special badness of the era, heedless and analog, like the seventies themselves.

I told Ray that after Amy and I moved to the Beachcombers the female workers stopped speaking to her. We never imagined, I said, that someday they'd throw a party, and he laughed and said, "Yeah, this started as a joke." He and a couple of his wives and his sister and some of their children and grandkids had gone to the boat site for a photo, and someone said they really ought to include the freaks who'd hung out at the place, since they were there in spirit anyway. For a while, that was the riff: what if crazy Diablo showed up, offering once again to let Ray shoot a beer bottle from his fingertips for two cases of Oly? (Diablo, who now has been gone for some time. But in the seventies Ray took him up on the offer, and no one got hurt.) And what of the women who'd worked by the clock? All of them something over seventy by now, but wouldn't they have the tales!

Yet as the twenty-fifth anniversary of the closing neared, Ray wondered if something might come of the old joke. He called a friend who owned

clubs in Anchorage but had once been the bassist for LA Network, a cover band—virtually the Beachcombers' house band for a while. Gee, the guy said, it was thirty-one years, but he thought they'd be game. Ray called Sam Moon, an eccentric Newfoundland singer who'd had long runs on the boat. Once, when the funnels were being removed from the top deck, either to stanch leaks or pay bills with the scrap, a welder's spark had set a stateroom afire, and Sam lost all his clothes—*good times*! But Sam was in. Then Ray wondered if the event should be broader; the boat was a city, after all. He called Toby Sullivan, former Beachcombers resident and founder of both the Kodiak Maritime Museum and Fishermen Out Loud, an outgrowth of a Lower 48 event, the FisherPoets Gathering. A poetry series was added, benefiting the museum. The Humane Society got on board, and a Cute Pets Film Fest was tacked on for Saturday. A local artists' group hung a show in the downstairs gallery, and the Alutiiq Museum displayed artifacts from five eras. Ray said yes to everything, reserving only one wall for blueprints of the *Princess Norah* and one for a poster with the names of the dead. At a table at the foot of the stairs, the poets sold books, zines, and CDs.

And what the hell do we seek, picking the scab of the past? Anyone over a certain age will idealize the reckless playtime of youth, but when nostalgia gets institutionalized we call it by other names: gentrification, appropriation. Or maybe, alternatively: accommodation, even progress. Ray's now in his late sixties, still tall and good-looking but clean-shaven, his white hair thickest above his ears. As the owner of a successful restaurant employing lots of cheerful young people, he's the town father his dad also became, and at the reunion, dressed in a Beachcombers Reunion T-shirt (available for sale, long-sleeved, short-sleeved, and hoodie versions), he brought the skills of a tavern keeper to the role of a mayor, cheering performers, making introductions, overseeing food and drink and talking a *Kodiak Daily Mirror* reporter through those blueprints. Toggling nimbly between a shined-up civic-centered event and the rose-colored debauchery of its raison d'être.

But then, Kodiak itself is different from the place I knew. The town that ended so abruptly it seemed to have been switched off now sprawls down

paved roads that I remember as dirt. The funky cannery where Amy and I worked now lies within a corporate orbit and operates year-round at full capacity. The sweet guy who gave me a tour offered gentle correction to the term *foreman* ("production manager") and pointed to the computerization of jobs like precision slicing, though the work in general still looks taxing and wet. As to whether college kids still migrate from the Lower 48 for summer work, perhaps he didn't hear me, then didn't hear me again; there was a whiff of nontransient employment to the crew.

Even the huge Kraft supermarket that was once a town centerpiece is no more. Its beautiful peaked building stands empty, and a Safeway glows 2.4 miles out Mill Bay Road. Everywhere I went I got one response to the news that I'd lived here in the 1970s: "Oh, now, *that* was when we were still the Wild West…." Of course, even the Wild West is just an allegory.

LA Network is a clutch of guys with dad bods and curious hair plus a woman in black who's kept in shape. According to my notes, both the Friday and Saturday sets began with "Hollywood Nights," but whatever the reasoning, it got the jury of their peers aroused, and after half a dozen numbers Sam Moon took the stage. Moon's a large man whose trademarks are: 1) a decent channeling of Van Morrison, and 2) the caftans he wears to perform. Watching him dial up the feel-good with a version of "Moondance," I wondered if the caftan was a drag thing or what, but by the time Sam and I chatted I'd decided that point was moot. Here was a guy who'd been at it a long time and did his bliss: more power to him.

I asked Sam how he'd found the Beachcombers, and he said it was Legs who used to fly down to Vancouver to sign acts. In 1972 Legs booked him for a three-to-four-month gig that got renewed annually into the eighties. While I tried to figure if I'd known him in the old days, Sam told me of a janitor who'd worked the Beachcombers for years. The fishermen were high rollers, he said, and when the price per pound rose they'd stand rounds for the house. "Maybe two hundred drinks. Then they'd get wasted and lose track of their money. There'd be dropped coins, bills, sometimes jewelry on the floor." He gave a chuckle. "And each morning the janitor went in and cleaned up." *Laugh line*, *bah-boom*. Then it was time for him to go sing

“Brown Eyed Girl,” and as I reentered the party room, a drunk with a narrow face offered a high five. I put my hand up, and he asked who the fuck wears a T-shirt in fuckin’ Alaska. It turns out a bar reunion’s a lot like a bar.

But every poetry event’s poetic in its own way, as Tolstoy pointed out. Fishermen Out Loud included four men and four women, all with roots in Alaska commercial fishing. Some had flown in from other ports, and one missed the final night when the boat he captained went out before dawn. And, yeah, there was doggerel—“I’m not very good at writing anything that’s sad,” one big, grinning guy declared—but most was ambitious and serious and sharp; think Philip Levine with a haul of salmon on ice. Sacred testaments to the rigors of the job, hymns to the dangerous allure of fishing itself and to the impulses that draw the same person up into the Bering one night and to a roadhouse on dry land another. Narratives of wrecks and storms and lucky runs.

Also: Carefully turned lines. Interesting diction. Attention to form and a measure of attitude. A poet called Meezie Hermansen said that a villanelle “turns out to be a French poem with a whole buncha stinkin’ rules, a few of which I followed,” then read an elegant one comparing painting to fishing. “When we reach the vanishing point, may we find a masterpiece.” There was a piece about a deckhand called Copacetic Tim, who got beaten at a summer party, and an angry, precise poem about crewing while female. There were shout-outs to XTRATUFFs, the only rubber boot anyone will be caught dead in, and references to gillnetting, chubs, kings, big tides, flares, trawlers, and the Caterpillar 3298. Also shore, home, and death. The most mesmerizing performances were by a guy called Steve Schoonmaker, who’d closed the bar at the Beachcombers one night twenty-nine years ago and drunkenly walked across Mission Road (“Before the guardrail,” cried an audience wag) and there, on the pebble beach, decided to fish. He’s been fishing ever since and writing poems since the nineties, his house sauce an incantatory anapestic tetrameter, as in: “Illusions of separateness that we exist on our own / Contained in our bodies, outside all we’ve known / Dividing up nature till we’re divided alone / At the top of some food chain we’ll conquer and own.” Whew.

I went for a breather and ran into Justine, a boisterous charmer who was Ray's wife through the boat years and still takes a proprietary interest in the place. She was scanning the memorial to the departed (five hundred–plus names, including one David King), and I said I mostly hadn't known anyone's last name. I said it helped if they didn't have one and pointed to "Diablo," and Justine said that in the old days you'd be in the women's shower and hear a buzzing sound: Diablo drilling a peephole through the steel wall. A woman named Susan, she said, had banged a fist on the wall and cried, "Diablo! At least wait till I'm done!"

For a moment we gaped at how thoroughly a world can change, then Justine took my arm and said *this* was what she regretted. She'd wanted an open-mike session for sharing old tales, but with all the activities plus a showcase for local musicians, it hadn't taken off. "Maybe the next one," she said. "In eight years, it'll be seventy-five years since the Beachcombers' founding."

I said I thought the poets had story hour covered; upstairs Toby Sullivan had just read an essay about a Beachcombers shooting. "They rolled him over on his back, and his eyes were open but unblinking. His left arm rolled across his chest and flopped on the floor next to him, the back of his hand hitting the dirty linoleum with a faint slap. I shut the door and kept the light off and lay very quietly in my bunk with my clothes on. The band kept playing upstairs." Toby arrived on Kodiak in '74, just like me. Like me, he had a room at the Beachcombers, but we did not overlap. And then Toby stayed on—fished, put down roots, started the Maritime Museum—whereas I hadn't been back.

How do you look at something that's no longer there? Each day, stepping outside, I was struck by the familiar salt-fish smell of the town, which I'd forget each night in my room at the Best Western, and as I thought of the two routes I'd walked daily with Amy, I felt like young Marcel—or maybe old Marcel—accessing memories through sense. The sky on my last morning was a bright piebald blue, and I chose the Mission Road route, which had wended along a wooded coast back in '74. But just past the Russian church, where the trees had once taken over, stood a row of houses,

and around the next turn the houses continued. Modest homes, fancy homes, those on the left sitting up on a bank, those on the right on yards cleared to the water. I walked on, texting Amy, looking at trucks and boat trailers and little porches and nodding to neighborhood folk, and on a wild spur where on the night of June 21, 1974, I'd stayed up reading *Swann's Way* and watching the sun fail to set, I discovered a landscaped compound with green lawn, gabled McMansion, seawall and outbuildings—but also nets hung to dry in a stand of carefully preserved pines. Across the street, the old gravel lot was now paved, and the third Beachcomber building, the one with the steel floor, completed a line of houses. There was a Salvation Army sign on it, and other Salvation Army buildings dotted the lot. Where Potatopatch Lake had once faded into grassy wetlands, a mobile-home community had sprung up.

From the air—or from Google Earth—the shape of a prow is still visible as a promontory, bilaterally symmetrical, jutting into the lake. Ray had told me about a remnant at the spot where the extended LeGrue clan had taken that photo, and as I strolled toward it, a woman in a windbreaker appeared, heading the same way. I hadn't seen her at the reunion, but I thought maybe she too was on a memory mission, so I called out, offering to let her go on alone. She turned, and I saw she was older than I, with the sunken face of a lifelong smoker. "I don't needa see that," she said gruffly. "I used to work at the Beachcombers." I said I'd once lived there and asked what she'd done. "I used to go there with my friend," she said and turned her back on me.

I watched her ignore me as she smoked at the edge of the lake, then I walked onto the promontory and found the bit of bow rising six inches above the grass. Just a rusted steel V, reinforced at the tip, it looked like a wishbone with a groove down each leg. The legs ran about two feet before cutting off abruptly; between them, a bent pipe with a chain attached poked from the earth. That was all there was left.

I looked toward the ocean and imagined the line of the hull as I'd known it. It would shear through one of the Salvation Army structures, I decided. The awninged entrance we'd used would be *there* and the gangways *there* and the far side of the hull, where no one ever went, just about *there*. I thought of the times Amy and I had gone to the top deck to look at the sky

over the bleak, rugged coast, then I walked my imagined plan and tried to gauge where the Little Bar had been, and the stairs and the gangways and washrooms, the communal shower where, once, after she was gone, I picked up a Russian sailor and brought him back to my cubicle.

I pictured the blue stateroom Amy and I'd occupied together, its porthole overlooking a patch of reeds sprouting from stagnant water. Beyond the reeds the grim deli had stood, the sole structure in those days and a place where we'd shoplifted minijars of peanut butter and packages of jerky and Kraft singles. Back then the entire lake surface had looked mossily green, and junk was piled on the banks, possibly still from the '64 disaster. But when I found the spot where I thought our room had been and turned toward our porthole view, I saw sparkling water, dark and fresh looking, with white puffs mirrored affectionately on the surface. Where the woods had been impenetrable on the far side of the lake were still more nice homes, several with mown paths down a slope for lake access. The deli building was included in the Salvation Army complex, all of it shut tight. At the lake's edge, where I recalled marsh and trash, the banks had been cleaned up.

And the town's id, that outpost of badness—as it had been all those years ago, before nostalgia, before memory? It was the reason I'd come, but what had become of it? At my feet a breeze rustled the grass over the wishbone hull, and across the lake a child threw a stone at the water then went inside a house. The clouds reflected on the lake surface paused, and the mental plan of the boat, which I'd paced out minutes earlier, began to waver. Like the cabin on Potatopatch Lake giving way to a white-tablecloth hotel, like *that* place giving way to the boat I recalled, the boat I recalled gave way slipperily to a nonboat, huge and somnolent, rising as invisibly as a series of dots, a shimmering outline molded of blue air. A bird flew through the space where the boat had stood, and even the smoking woman—whoever she was or had been long ago—had somehow disappeared without my knowing.

Mona Sparrow

Lauren Green

I met her on the first day of kindergarten, when her leaves were beginning to change. She had rosy cheeks and dark, strangely wizened eyes, like those of a horse. I was surprised to see her at first, because even at four years old, I thought I knew everyone in our Podunk town, which was hemmed in by salt flats on all sides—flats glassy as ice and so barren they whetted the horizon line to a single, precise seam. My father swore that if a person gazed at that seam for long enough, he would see where the earth curved.

Every night, my father came home after working tedious hours in the salt mines and stood on the front porch, shaking crystals from the cuffs of his trousers and stamping his mucking boots against the wooden planks, causing raccoons to scurry out from below. Our town was known for the mines. In every other regard, we lived in an optionless place: one church, one schoolhouse, one barbershop, one supermarket, one graveyard.

Hardly anyone ever tried to cross the salt flats; they were so limitless. That was why it was particularly strange to find Mona Sparrow sitting in her tiny desk chair on that first day, removing a spiral notebook from her knapsack. She wore white knee-highs with blue beads fringing the edges; her leafy hair was wild and ungroomed. Since it was September, the foliage had only just begun to color, and the tips of Mona's leaves looked as if they had been dipped in flames.

Mona didn't mention the leaves until we asked. At four, we already understood when one thing was not like the others. We wanted to know where Mona came from and why her head resembled a tree.

"Why haven't we seen you before?" we pressed, encircling her desk like wasps around refuse. "Why haven't you made angels with us on the flats? Or decorated salt-art bottles at Summerfest?"

Mona shrugged. She didn't like to talk much.

Over the course of that year, and the next, and the next, we adjusted to the caprices of her leaves. By third grade, the school janitor had taken to keeping a rake beside the chalkboard to make cleanup easier when autumn came.

Mona was our seasonal clock. If her leaves were scarlet, it meant Halloween was around the corner. If they were glowworm green, it meant the flowers would soon begin to unfurl, spilling over the earth with their cloying smell. During the cold and lonely winter months, she took to wriggling a pink knit cap over her bald pate so that none of us would stare.

We stared anyway. Sometimes, to our great delight, birds would alight on Mona's branches during recess. We would gather around to egg them on, urging them to peck harder and build their nests faster. We especially loved when it rained, and the droplets stayed suspended on her leaves, perfect iridescent globes. Every time she moved, rainwater dribbled down her neck and dampened the back of her shirt.

I sat behind Mona in class since my last name too began with an *S*. I stared at her leaves every day, wishing they were mine. My hair was muddy brown. I had the sort of open, oval face that was forgettable, and I was painfully average at every activity I tried. Mona was different—she couldn't help but be extraordinary. What I wanted was not to be friends with her. Rather, I wanted for her to want to be friends with *me*.

In the fourth grade, Amanda Cotton hosted a sleepover party for her tenth birthday. Amanda's mother insisted that if Amanda was inviting all the other fourth-grade girls, it was only proper that she also invite Mona. No one expected her to come. But sure enough, at six o'clock, Mona showed up at the door, emergency-yellow sleeping bag tucked beneath one arm, bearing presents for both Amanda and Mrs. Cotton.

Mrs. Cotton warmed to Mona right away. "Well, aren't you the cutest little thing," she said, tousling Mona's tawny leaves, which disintegrated beneath her fingers. I felt my heart pang and shut my eyes, imagining it was my hair Mrs. Cotton was playing with.

Amanda had planned a list of all our activities—homemade mineral facials and late-night prank calls and pillowcase decorating with special fabric markers. We sat cross-legged in a single-file line and braided one

another's hair while Mona sat off in the corner, humming to herself and stroking her knobby branches.

Her insouciance incensed us. In the face of our curiosity, there seemed something cruel in her indifference, how little she cared what we thought of her. We huddled together in one corner of the Cottons' dank basement and whispered about what to do. "I have an idea," Amanda declared, loud enough for Mona to overhear. "Let's play Would You Rather."

The questions were standard at first: Would you rather lick a hobo's foot or only be able to eat foods that are blue for the rest of your life? Would you rather be invisible or be able to read minds? Would you rather be married to a merman or a centaur?

Finally, we turned to Mona. "Hey, Mona," Amanda said, "would you rather be so ugly your parents never let you leave the house or be so pathetic you only get invited places because people feel sorry for you?"

The tips of Mona's ears reddened. She opened her mouth like she was about to say something. We waited. We wanted Mona to cry, to let us know that what we'd said was mean. Dry eyed, she simply turned her face and looked away.

"Baby," someone said, and we all snickered extra loud, refusing to meet each other's gazes.

Eventually, Mrs. Cotton shuffled downstairs in her slippers and bathrobe to shut the light. "Sweet dreams, girls," she said. "I'm right upstairs if you need anything." I glanced over at Amanda, whose face was flushed with embarrassment. I wondered if this was how her mother always tucked her into bed.

We snuggled into our sleeping bags, cocooning ourselves in the familiar smells of our own homes, which suddenly seemed so far away in the mildewy dark. Around us, the floor was littered with candy wrappers. The ends of my fingertips buzzed.

On one side of the basement, the hopper window was open, a night breeze drifting through. I rolled over to look out at the sliver of papery moon. Just then, a large gust of wind swept across the room. Leaves flew from Mona's head, scattering over all the sleeping bodies. The smell of maple filled the air. I watched as Mona rose quietly, then stooped to pick

the leaves up one by one. She tiptoed between the sleeping bags with such obeisance, it was as if she were moving through the rows of a cemetery.

In junior high, Mona made more of an effort to insert herself into our activities. She joined choir and, since she was the tallest girl in the entire sixth grade, stood on the topmost riser, right behind me. When she sang, her voice had a haunting, silvery timbre, like she was a bird calling out for its fledgling.

After rehearsal one day, I went up to Mona as she was preparing to leave. "You know," I said, "you're a really good singer."

Mona leveled her eyes on me and screwed up her face, trying to decipher whether or not I was mocking her. "OK," she said, then got up and left.

I didn't know why I cared so much, but a week later I approached her again. This time I reached into my pocket and held out my hand. Sitting in the center of my palm was a glimmering chunk of rock salt my father had once brought back from the mines. Its edges were jagged; its translucent surface striated with fine cleavage breaks.

"Here," I said, handing it to Mona. She took the salt from me uncertainly and turned it over, running her pointer finger over the sharp corners. The spinning crystal cast rainbow shadows across her face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Halite," I said. "It's supposed to ward off evil spirits."

Mona's eyes began to brim.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to—"

"No." She used the edge of her sleeve to wipe away the tears. "It's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me." She squeezed the salt so tightly, I thought for sure its points would slice open her palm.

Mona's choir days were short-lived. One time, during the dress rehearsal for a concert, her leaves fell on the stage and Tommy Cutler, who had a solo, tripped over them in his long blue robe and had to be shuttled to the emergency room for a concussion.

Everything changed in the eighth grade, when William Percy moved to town. William was tall, with an aquiline nose and light, piercing eyes.

Rumor had it that he had been sent to live with his aunt and uncle on the town's western outskirts, in a house that bordered the flats.

Every day, William would come to school with his salt-caked hair matted to his head. Word quickly spread that he was working the night shift down in the mines to teach him the value of hard work. What could he have possibly done to deserve such treatment. Drugs? Larceny? Murder? We whirred with speculation.

Each of us took to William instantly. Except for Mona, who wouldn't so much as look at him when he stood beside her in Ms. Roger's chemistry class. Whenever he reached out to adjust the cobalt flame of the Bunsen burner, Mona would recoil, drawing her arm back as though she'd been singed.

"What is it, Mona?" we asked.

She simply shook her head, causing the veins on her leaves to catch the overhead fluorescents.

Behind her back, we sang, "Mona and William, sitting in her leaves. K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" Her remove unnerved us, though. Was it mere jealousy? The truth was, we would have taken Mona over William any day. Even though William was a delinquent, we'd lived long enough to know that delinquents were banal. It seemed to us that there was only one Mona Sparrow, and we vowed to do whatever it took to protect her.

One day, Mona came up to me after English class as I was collating the assignments in my homework folder. "I need to talk to you," she said.

"OK."

"It's about William."

Mona told me that she had seen William changing out of his mining uniform that morning behind the schoolhouse. When he'd removed his shirt, she caught sight of something strange, something glistening in the center of his stomach.

"I can't say for certain," she said, "but it was like he had glass there."

"Glass? Like he fell on a vase or something?"

"No." She shook her head; her branches rattled. "His stomach was a see-through dome, and there was snow falling behind it."

I started to pull away, zipping up my knapsack and rising from my seat.

“Look,” she said, reaching out for my arm, “I know it sounds crazy. But you believe me, right?”

Mona’s dark eyes were lambent and imploring. “Yes,” I said.

The next day, it snowed. It snowed and snowed. On the football field behind the school, white powder whirled in the beam of the floodlights. The chalky sky bled into the flats below. Mona looked over at me in chemistry and wiggled her eyebrows in William’s direction. I recalled what she had said, about the snow behind his stomach.

The more I thought on it, the more plausible it seemed. William controlled the seasons. He was the reason Mona’s leaves fell out every November. I started to tell the other students at school what Mona had seen, and pretty soon it was all anyone could talk about. Behind his back, we referred to William as “Weatherboy.” We began to think, *If we could just get rid of Weatherboy, Mona’s agony would be gone. No more pink cap. No more falling leaves.*

The boys were less enthusiastic. It wasn’t so much that they liked William, but they didn’t see any reason to get rid of him. That is, until two important events took place. The first was when Garrett Conklin, the boy who had insisted on wearing his mother’s strappy heels to the middle-school dance, tried to get a glimpse of William’s stomach in the locker room after gym class, to see if what Mona had claimed was true. When William caught Garrett looking at his exposed torso, he snapped, “Hey, fruitcake, quit staring.”

The second was when William usurped Tommy’s role as lead alto boy in choir. Tommy had been lead for as long as any of us could remember.

The boys strolled over to us at recess the following day. “OK,” they said. “How are we gonna do it?”

There were a few details to work out. For one, there would be the matter of William’s absence, though we didn’t think this would be hard to explain. We could just say he was unhappy, that it was all he’d ever talk about—how depressing it was to work overnight in those mines, so much white. We’d say he had run toward the flats on the edge of town and there … well, you can imagine.

Mona was the most skeptical. “What if it doesn’t work?” she asked, scratching at the scar on her head where a squirrel had once tried to bury its acorns.

“It will,” we said. “We just have to time it properly. We’ll want to do it when your leaves are out, because that’ll be the color they stay.”

“October then,” she said.

It was already September. We didn’t have much time. The anticipation set in like a sugar rush. We spent a great deal of time speculating about what would happen when we finally killed the boy who controlled the seasons. Would each of us be frozen exactly as we were too, as fourteen-year-olds with acne and braces? This possibility terrified us. We wanted to turn into adults. But we loved Mona Sparrow—oh, how we loved her!

We had agreed to kill William in one of the school’s music practice rooms, because they were fully soundproofed. Since it was I who had thought up the idea in the first place, I was in charge of luring William away.

“Hey, William,” I said, sidling up to him by the lockers after class.

“Yeah?” He spun to face me. It was the first time I’d ever looked at him head-on like this, and I felt my breath catch. He was astonishingly handsome. His eyes were lucid and chilled as they settled on my face. *Like winter*, I thought, shivering.

“I heard you’re the best alto in choir,” I said.

“Sure.” He puffed up his chest, just a bit. I knew I had him then.

“I was wondering if you could help me with my vibrato.”

He looked at me skeptically. “Now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why not? The practice room is free. I would have asked Tommy, but he’s not as good.”

“Right,” William said. He slammed his locker shut, then followed me to the practice room, where the rest of us were waiting.

When he caught sight of the entire gang, packed thickly in a semicircle, he began to stutter. “Hey,” he said, “what’s the—”

Before he could finish his sentence, we grabbed his arms and twisted them behind his back. He yelped in pain. Amanda unspooled a large strip of duct tape and plastered it over his lips. Then we stabbed him, piercing his

skin with the plastic knives we'd pilfered from the school cafeteria, until beads of blood pearled on his flesh.

It was a slow, painful way to go. The knives were dull and rubbery and would bend unless we held them at just the right angle, wheedling them into his flesh. The blades chafed against his arms, scoring with hatch lines. It looked as though he'd been mauled by the raccoons that lived beneath my house.

William heaved and gasped for breath. He didn't try to dissuade us. It was then that something strange started to happen—an oppressive heat began to radiate from his palms, still tied behind his back. The heat was so searing, our knives melted into a bubbling puddle on the carpet. We looked at one another's dampened faces. I shut my eyes and imagined that I was in an African veld, standing before a round, red sun.

The room got hotter and hotter. It seemed only a matter of time before each of us suffocated. "What do we do?" Tommy sputtered, his face a mottled crimson.

But just as soon as he said it, the heat seemed to burst like a blister. Water came shooting out of William's kneecaps. "Agh!" we screamed, dodging the steady stream. It flowed and flowed, beating a dirge on the drum set in the corner. At last the surge petered out and each of us stood, soused, in awe.

Then William died.

For a moment, we all stared at his body, as if expecting his fingers to twitch, or his eyes to blink. Someone reached over and poked his side, just to be sure.

"What are we going to do with him?" I asked. We had only thought of what we'd say to the police—not of how we would dispose of the body.

We rock-paper-scissorsed. Tommy was the winner, and he said we should take William to the salt flats. The six strongest boys stepped forward solemnly, our pallbearers. "One, two, three!" they cried, hefting William's body onto their shoulders.

Outside, the world seemed as we'd left it. Shoulders hunched to our ears, we glanced around uneasily, trying to detect any differences. We noticed the birds roosting on the telephone wire first. Was it possible they were less

blue than they had been? Someone pointed to the sky. It was grayer than we remembered. “Maybe it’s supposed to rain,” Amanda suggested, though we knew this was highly unlikely.

The boys walked with William’s body on their backs, one of his limp arms dangling between their heads, while the rest of us trailed behind. They complained that their arms ached, but they dared not stop, not until we got to the flats.

“Shh,” someone said. “Listen.”

The wind skated over the crust, echoing through the cracks as if through hollow bones.

We continued walking, tiptoeing over the endless sheets of salt. Was this what walking on the surface of the moon felt like? In the backs of our minds, we could hear the warning our parents had given us so many times before, not to go so far onto the flats that we lost sight of home.

“Which way?” we asked.

Tommy pointed his finger forward, as if he knew.

“We should leave trail markers,” I said. “Bread crumbs or something.”

“Good idea—anyone have any bread?” Tommy asked.

None of us did. We decided to use articles of clothing instead, dropping stray mittens and scarves that curled sinuously against the white. We walked until we were out of clothing. The twinkling lights of the town disappeared behind us, and we could no longer see the smoke from the chimneys.

“Let’s set him down,” Tommy grunted, wiping sweat from his lip.

The boys squatted and shrugged William off their shoulders. He hit the ground with a thud. His skin had sallowed in the cold. He’d looked dead before, but this was a new level of lifelessness.

“Godspeed, Weatherboy,” someone whispered.

We bowed our heads and held our hands to our hearts. “Godspeed,” we repeated, taking in the sight of William’s tongueless lace-up boots, his crisp-starched shirt.

“We should strip him,” someone suggested. “It’ll be easier for his soul to escape that way.”

None of us wanted to be the one to undress William. And then, from somewhere deep among us, a voice, sweet as a lark's. "I'll do it."

Mona. We'd nearly forgotten she was among us. She lanced through the pack and knelt to the ground where the boys had deposited the body. With both hands, she lifted William's head and positioned it in her lap. Her fingers worried themselves through his flaxen hair, combing the tangles free of salt.

William looked so young, like a child sleeping in his mother's arms. Mona started to undo his shirt. None of us made any move to help. When, at last, all the buttons had been unfastened, Mona slid off one sleeve, then the other. We gasped at the sight of William's stomach, that stretch of marble-like expanse.

Mouths agape, we pointed, glugging at the air. There was no glass in William's stomach, no dome with snow behind it.

"Maybe it frosted over," Mona said, shrugging.

She shifted so she was by his feet. She eased off one boot, then the other, working as if she had all the time in the world. Each of us was shivering, hearts thrumming in our chests. She peeled off William's tattered socks, and we all stared at his feet, so large and exposed, calluses warping the whorls of each round toe pad.

Then she unzipped his fly—this was what we had been waiting for! But once she had removed his pants and underwear, we stared at his naked body and found ourselves disappointed. There was something painfully human about how shriveled he was. We wrapped our disappointment in mirth and snickered.

Tommy reached down and took William's boots, cupping their soles in his open palms like they were water. "These shouldn't go to waste," he said.

Someone else reached out and took William's shirt, his pants.

"Enough," we said. "Let's dig him a grave."

We got down on our hands and knees. Our fingernails scrabbled against the salt's slick surface; it was like trying to shave ice. We only cumulated a few handfuls of salt—nowhere near enough to bury a person. We gathered whatever palmfuls we could and tossed them over William's body, like we were trying to preserve his meat. We stared at him, lying there, salted. He

looked like a mistake interrupting all that emptiness. None of us said so. Instead, we lifted our eyes and gazed longingly at the curve of the earth, like fish staring at the world that lay beyond our bowl.

For days, we waited. We waited for the cops, for William's aunt and uncle or his parents or a childhood friend to ring. No one did. It was as if William Percy had never existed, save for one detail: every day, the world turned more and more ashen. At first, we thought we were just imagining it. But then, other people started to notice too. It appeared as though someone had punctured the membrane of the sky and was letting all the blue ooze out of it.

The sun cooled to a waxen yellow. The moon stopped cycling. Every night, it looked exactly as it had on the day William died. Riverbanks flooded in areas where it hadn't stopped raining. Our hair and fingernails ceased to grow.

Naturally, the rest of the world did not connect this state of affairs to William Percy's death. I sat with my father's radio every night and listened to the tinny voices complain about global warming. The miners in town said it was a conspiracy, or an alien invasion. Others built arks, thinking this was the coming of a second flood.

"I bet it isn't this drab in the tropics," my father said, cheeks blanched by the anemic light that streamed through the kitchen window.

The only vibrant things left were Mona Sparrow's leaves. Whenever she walked into the classroom, we'd avert our eyes, not wanting her to see how thirsty we were for her brilliance. On the playground, her head glowed luridly beneath the pallid sun. We hated her for it.

Gathering in the hallways by the lockers, we discussed how we might go about reversing the curse. When Mona approached, we turned our backs and ignored her.

Wednesday, in gym class, we were playing dodgeball when we noticed a dark shadow blooming above Mona's ear. "Look!" we said, pointing. There, perched in her leafy head, was a single plum, feltlike and purple. Tommy reached out to touch it, but Mona reeled back at the sight of his hand. She brought her own fingers to the plum, testing its weight.

“It’s exquisite,” we said.

We looked at one another and nodded—now was our chance. We asked Mona to meet us after school, told her that we wanted to make amends for how we’d treated her these past few months. It wasn’t her fault she was so beautiful, we said. She regarded us skeptically, but none of us doubted she would be there.

Once the bell rang, we gathered by the flagpole, hands wormed into our pockets, and settled in to wait. Five minutes went by, then ten. “She isn’t coming,” someone said.

“She’ll be here.”

Sure enough, Mona appeared. Two boys darted out from the pack and jumped her. She shrieked and rammed her gnarled branches in our direction, like an animal who realizes it’s been decked for slaughter. We held her fast in our grip, feeling the warmth of her limbs, the flutter of her veins beneath our hands. She went slack with defeat.

“Don’t say anything or we’ll kill you,” we warned, as we marched her to the edge of town.

This time, we knew where we were going. Just before the salt flats was a spiny thicket made up of cacti and acacia trees—the only sorts of plants that could thrive in such saline soil. The shrubbery there was thorny, barren, densely packed. The trees were black. Vultures perched on boughs overhead; their necks swiveled to follow us as we walked. A breeze blew by. The air smelled of tears.

Around Mona’s middle, we tied a thick beige rope and tethered her to the tallest tree. Our eyes feasted on her rutilant leaves, her bright purple plum. Our bodies trembled with hunger. Tommy reached out and spun the plum on its vine, twisting it around and around. Mona howled—the sound of it something primal, as though he had sliced deep into her skin.

We watched Tommy lean in again and palm the plum so fiercely, his fingers left indentations in its skin. He tugged. The fruit gave with the faintest *snap* and Mona winced. “Don’t,” she said.

Tommy laughed. He opened his mouth and bit into the fruit. Pink juice sluiced from his lips and dribbled down the front of his shirt.

“How is it?” we asked.

As Tommy chewed, his eyes widened. “It’s delicious,” he said.

“Let us try!” we cried. We passed the plum around, taking turns. We loved how the silken skin puckered beneath our lips, how its syrup made our palms sticky.

Someone said it tasted like Christmas morning. Someone else said it tasted like the last day of school. When it was finished, we chucked the pit onto the ground. Stubborn pieces of skin clung in the spaces between our teeth. We licked our lips, savoring what little nectar remained. But it wasn’t enough—we wanted more. We stepped forward, taking fistfuls of Mona’s leaves in our hands. “No,” she wailed. “No, no, no!”

We yanked, drawing the leaves out by the branches. Mona cried out in pain, her shoulders quivering beneath the thin cotton of her shirt. We snapped the twigs one by one. We shredded the leaves—how red they were in our hands! Like little cardinals, fluttering from our fingertips.

“Look at us,” we hissed.

She did. Her horselike eyes were full of pain. “Please,” she whimpered.

Roaring with glee, we reached out again, pulling and shredding, until Mona was bald and shivering. But we didn’t want to stop. How could we stop when our curiosity drove us to want all of her, our beautiful Mona?

We brought our hands to her shirt and tore this off, then did the same to her skirt. What did she look like beneath those layers? Did she have a wooden trunk? Or a hollow in her breast? But no. Mona Sparrow was a girl, and, like William, achingly human.

We reached out, stroking her flesh, which shimmered with the wetness of her tears. We put our mouths to her skin. She shut her eyes. She began to hum, softly. I shut my eyes too, remembering Mona in choir, all those years before. I wondered what had become of the chunk of salt I had given her for protection. It was of no use now.

At last Mona stood naked against the tree, her eyelashes ornamented with tears, her body buckled in shame. We thought we’d better be getting home, before our parents started to worry. I couldn’t help but gaze over my shoulder at Mona as we walked away. Her dark eyes were blank and bleary, staring into the nothingness.

I returned to visit Mona the following afternoon. The walk to the thicket was much farther than it had seemed the day before.

She was still tied to the tree when I got there. Her cheekbones jutted out of her face, sharp, like the edges of the flats. Her dewy eyes roamed my face.

"I brought you something." Unzipping my knapsack, I reached inside and fished out Mona's old pink cap. It had been crumpled in a ball at the back of her locker.

Approaching her, I extended my hand. Maybe I meant to touch her cheek, or to stroke her bare head, but before I could do these things, she spat at me. "Get away," she said. But there was no ferocity behind her words. Without her branches, Mona Sparrow looked wan and frightened.

I dropped the hat and turned to leave.

"Wait!" she cried. But I didn't turn back.

Mona's empty gaze—it followed me. I couldn't face the rest of them at school. "What's your problem?" they asked, poking me between the shoulders with the points of their pencils. I just shook my head. There was nothing left to say.

I went back with a knife to cut Mona down a few days later. I called her name as I wandered through the bramble. A bird regarded me curiously, then flitted away.

Walking over to the tree where Mona had been tied, I noticed the ropes hung loosely around its trunk, right above the ground. No Mona. I pressed my hand to the rugged face of the bark, wondering if she had melded into it, wondering if I was touching her. I glanced up. On one of the upper branches, amber buds, like jewels, sparkled in the gray.

I sank against the tree and looked down at the ground. There, stuck on one of the tree's exposed, rambling roots, I saw it—Mona's pink hat. Frost had grown over the yarn; the fabric was cold to the touch. I picked up the hat and put it on my head. Then I got up and began the long walk home.

Her Old Home

Can Xue

—Translated from Chinese by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping

She hadn't wanted to give up her bungalow in the city. Twenty years ago, Zhou Yizhen had come down with a serious illness. The best thing to do was to sell the house and move to an old apartment building in the distant suburbs—the living quarters for workers at a tire factory. She said to her husband, Xu Sheng, "Be patient for another year or two, and then you'll be free."

Xu Sheng glared and retorted, "Life and death are determined by destiny. We don't get to make these big decisions."

Living in the tire-factory quarters was hard on Zhou Yizhen. She couldn't remember when she began to believe that she wouldn't die. She contacted a nearby woolen mill, and knitted scarves and caps for it at home. After cooking, she sat on the balcony every day and knitted, and she became steadily healthier. The air in the suburbs was better than in the city, and fresh vegetables were available. Zhou Yizhen regained her health, and the nightmare in her memory gradually dimmed.

Xu Sheng hadn't mentioned their former home for years because he didn't want to make her feel bad.

Although the city wasn't far away by bus, Zhou Yizhen had never gone back to see their old house. She wasn't very sentimental, but after all she *had* lived there half her life, had gone to primary and middle school there, and had worked in a factory, married, and given birth to her daughter. That bungalow figured in so many of her memories. Although she'd been away for twenty years, she often still lived there in her dreams. She rarely dreamed of the tire-factory quarters.

Zhou Yizhen was planning to deliver her consignment to the mill Wednesday afternoon (she had knitted some baby shoes and would earn quite a lot for this) when the phone rang. It wasn't her daughter, Jing. The woman on the other end of the line asked Zhou Yizhen when she would come to see her old home, as if they had an appointment. Zhou Yizhen remembered her the moment she heard her voice. It was the woman who had bought their bungalow all those years ago.

Her name was Zhu Mei, a single woman five or six years younger than Zhou Yizhen. Zhu Mei worked in a design institute. Zhou Yizhen remembered the evening she turned the house over to her. Zhu Mei kept standing in the shadows behind the half-open door, as though she didn't want others to get a good look at her expression. So many years had passed, and yet Zhu Mei was still thinking about her. Zhou Yizhen felt nervous but she couldn't explain why. Zhou Yizhen said she hadn't thought about going back to see her old home, but she was grateful to Zhu Mei. It seemed she'd done the right thing in selling the place to her.

"Please come and visit. Will you?" the woman insisted.

"OK. I'll come Saturday."

As soon as she hung up, Zhou Yizhen had misgivings. How could she have agreed? She wasn't superstitious, but she wasn't sure she could handle the memories of those days when she suffered from the terrible disease. Intravenous injections, swallowing handfuls of pills, and the frightening chemotherapy—she had nearly buried these dark memories. Was she now ready to revive them? And if Xu Sheng knew, he would surely not agree.

On the way back from the woolen mill, Zhou Yizhen began feeling better. She hadn't expected to receive so much—two hundred yuan! They could live on this for three months. Although she was fifty-five years old, she felt more energetic than ever. The world was green, and flowers were in bloom. Zhou Yizhen was sweating as she walked. She was also working out a new design for baby shoes. She nearly laughed out loud. When she was almost home, she decided that Saturday afternoon, she would indeed go to her old place in the city and look around. She was proud of this decision.

After dinner, she told her husband about this.

"Zhu Mei isn't an ordinary woman," Xu Sheng said.

“Do you mean I shouldn’t go?”

“No, no, this isn’t what I mean. Why not go? Since you want to go, just go.”

Xu Sheng’s answer surprised Zhou Yizhen. She knew that it wasn’t out of a lack of concern for her. How had he reasoned that she should go? Xu Sheng was a straightforward, fairly simple man. If he thought she could go, then she probably wouldn’t have to worry about this trip. And she *was* curious about her old home.

The three days passed quickly. During this time, Zhou knitted an entirely new style of baby shoes; they were very pretty. Xu Sheng held the wool shoes up and looked at them from all angles. He was as happy as she was. “Remember to tell Zhu Mei how skilled you are at knitting.” Zhou Yizhen asked why. He said, “I don’t want her to look down on us.”

Zhou Yizhen was startled. What an odd idea coming from her husband.

“I don’t care what others think,” she replied.

“That’s good.”

Zhou Yizhen was a little nervous on the bus. She was still sort of worried about going back. She kept saying to herself, If I continue thinking positively, there won’t be a problem.

After getting off the bus, she headed for Jixiang Lane. Once there, she found a dilapidated lane where many bungalows had been demolished. It didn’t look at all as it had in the past. The city was in the midst of rapid development: the changes in Jixiang Lane should not have been a surprise, but still she was shocked by the scene.

Eventually, she reached her former home. Her little courtyard remained the same, but no one was there. Zhou Yizhen saw the faucet outside the door of the house: she had often washed clothes and mops here. She felt a little sick at heart, yet she quickly got hold of herself.

She knocked on the door several times, but no one answered. Curious, she pushed the door gently, and it opened.

It was really strange: the furnishings in the two rooms were exactly the same as the ones she had had in her home! Hadn’t she moved all of them? What she and her husband had turned over to Zhu Mei was an empty house. With mixed feelings Zhou Yizhen sat at her old-style dressing table. She

didn't want to move, remembering the last time she had sat here. Back then, the bald woman reflected in the mirror had made her quiver.

She heard approaching footsteps. Probably the owner had returned.

"Sister Zhou, you're here. I'm so glad! I'm really fortunate!" Zhu Mei glanced at her.

"Fortunate?"

"Yes. You always inspire me."

"Hold on a moment. What are you talking about? And what about the furniture and the way everything is arranged in this home?"

"Oh, you mustn't be confused. I designed it so it would look the way it did before you moved out. Back then, I came to your home several times. Have you forgotten? I was a designer. How should I put it? At that time, I had sunk to the lowest point of my life. I decided to cast off my old self and change into a new and different person. I happened to meet you in the hospital and learned that you wanted to sell your house. I followed you and your husband here."

"You made up your mind to change yourself into me?" Zhou Yizhen paled.

"That's right. Please don't be mad at me." As she answered, Zhu Mei looked Zhou Yizhen directly in the eye. "In fact, you saved me. See? I'm living a full and healthy life."

"Hold on, please give me a moment to think."

"Here—I brewed some tea for you. Have some. You don't look so good. Do you want to lie down and rest for a while? This is still your home."

Zhou Yizhen drank some tea and composed herself. Her gaze dulled and slowly shifted to those familiar furnishings.

"This is great," she said insincerely. "I've truly returned to my former home. Is that my chopping knife? I cut lotus seeds with it in the processing plant. Zhu Mei, you must have gone to a lot of trouble with all of this. I can't believe my eyes!"

A neighbor stood at the door and looked in. He recognized Zhou Yizhen.

"Mei, you have company. I'm here to collect for the electricity. I can come back whenever it's convenient."

He didn't greet Zhou Yizhen. She felt awkward and dispirited. Did this neighbor think she had died? In the past, they'd seen each other every day.

"Yes, I have a guest. Don't you recognize her?" Zhu Mei said.

"She seems a little familiar. No, I don't know her."

He left, looking a bit terrified. Zhou Yizhen suddenly felt tired. She struggled to keep her eyes open. Zhu Mei's figure looked distorted.

"You're sleepy. Lie down. I'll help you take your shoes off. Yes, that's good. I'm going out to buy some groceries. We'll have dinner together tonight. What? You say there's a spider? Don't be afraid. There's one in this room, but it doesn't amount to anything…."

Before she fell asleep, Zhou Yizhen heard Zhu Mei close the door.

When Zhou Yizhen awakened, the sun had set. She had slept a long time. She felt she was acting strange: why had she come to another person's home and fallen asleep on another person's bed? She had never done anything so out of character. She heard Zhu Mei busying herself in the kitchen, and so she made the bed and went to help right away.

Zhu Mei had cooked an appetizing meal. Zhou Yizhen thought she was very good at taking care of herself.

As they ate, Zhou Yizhen said, "Look, I'm so embarrassed that—"

Zhu Mei interrupted her at once. "Don't be. Please. This was your home in the first place. You can do whatever you wish here. Anyhow, I'm the one who invited you to come."

After dinner, they tidied up the kitchen together. Zhou Yizhen was going to go home. Zhu Mei said, "Didn't you notice a bed made up in each bedroom? This one is especially for you, even when you aren't here. I sleep in the inner bedroom."

Zhou Yizhen was surprised.

"I haven't discussed this with Xu. I don't think he would agree."

"Why not? I'm sure he would. Just phone him."

So Zhou Yizhen sat down and phoned.

"That's great," Xu Sheng said. "Since she really wants you to stay, you may take the opportunity to get better acquainted with each other."

Xu's attitude seemed odd to Zhou Yizhen, because he had never shown great interest in making friends, and he knew that Zhou Yizhen didn't enjoy that either. Not without annoyance, Zhou Yizhen said to her husband, "OK, then I'll stay overnight. Sure you won't mind?"

"No, of course I won't mind."

The moment she hung up, Zhu Mei clapped her hands.

"Your husband is so understanding!"

But Zhou Yizhen was unhappy. She was still annoyed with her husband.

Zhu Mei asked her to take a seat at the desk. She invited Zhou Yizhen to page through the large photo album she had placed under the desk lamp.

The pictures in the album were all taken in places that she couldn't have known better. She missed them very much: a stone lion in the lane, a cast-iron mailbox on the street nearest to her home, the shop that had sold sugar-coated dried fruit for more than twenty years, the date tree in the little courtyard, the clothes of all different colors drying beneath the tree under the sun. But the main person in the photos, Zhu Mei, didn't look familiar. And Zhou Yizhen noticed that her face was always out of focus, and her body wasn't much in focus either. It was like a shadow. It was hard to believe that this was Zhu Mei. Looking more closely, Zhou Yizhen was startled because the main person in each photo actually looked like herself. Zhou Yizhen and Zhu Mei weren't at all alike: Zhu Mei had the features of an educated person; Zhou Yizhen didn't. What on earth were these photos about?

After Zhou Yizhen had paged through most of the album, she turned around. Zhu Mei had disappeared. So Zhou Yizhen got up and looked at all of the rooms. These furnishings and objects called to mind many sentimental memories. Under the present circumstances, she liked being sentimental for a moment. Sentiment was a beautiful thing. If she could cry, it would be even better. But she couldn't. It seemed that Zhu Mei had gone out. How could she leave her guest behind and go out by herself? But, then, why couldn't she do this? She'd already said she wanted Zhou Yizhen to consider this home her own. It was quiet outside: there was only the deep sound of the wind shaking the date tree branches. Zhou Yizhen felt safe in this house. She regretted having stayed away for twenty years. She had

misconstrued everything! If Zhu Mei hadn't invited her, would she have never returned? Could Zhu Mei have been calling her to come back throughout these twenty years in her peculiar way, and she hadn't heard? Zhou Yizhen kept thinking it over, sometimes sitting down, sometimes standing up and pacing. She sensed that the familiar objects in front of her were talking to her in low tones. Too bad she didn't understand.

At the corner of the wall was a little metal bucket with dried lotus seeds inside. Next to the bucket was a small bench. Zhou Yizhen's heart leapt happily! She sat down at once and started cracking open the lotus seeds. Though she hadn't done this for more than twenty years, she still knew how to do it! And she could do it almost without looking. It was as though she wasn't cracking lotus seeds but picking mushrooms in the forest. She joyfully discovered one after another. As she did this, she didn't think back to her work in the plant when she was young. Quite the opposite: what she recalled were the good things that she usually didn't think of. For example … Ah, she was suffocating from happiness! She wouldn't die from happiness, would she?

"Zhou Yizhen, are you fishing?"

Zhu Mei's voice came from the door. Why didn't she enter? Was she playing hide-and-seek? Zhou Yizhen put the knife down and went to look.

No one was in the courtyard. Where was Zhu Mei hiding? Zhou Yizhen walked lightly under the date tree, intense emotions rising from within. This courtyard had five other homes; the lights were on in each one, but the doors were shut tight. Zhou Yizhen recalled that it was never like this in the past; back then, the neighbors felt close to each other, and doors always stood open. Did all of these homes have new owners?

Without thinking, she walked out of the courtyard and came to the lane. So strange: at night, the lane didn't look at all dilapidated as it did in the daytime. Instead, it was clean and tidy, and full of life. Although you couldn't see anyone, that street was giving off light, as though some liveliness were left over from the daytime. The entrances of all of the courtyard houses stood wide open, letting her thoughts run wild.

Zhou Yizhen caught a glimpse of a woman's silhouette entering a courtyard house in front of her. Ah, was it Zhu Mei? She shouted: "Zhu

Mei!”

Zhu Mei dashed up to Zhou Yizhen.

“You’ve come out too,” she said with a smile. “Sure, why wouldn’t you? At night, it’s a Shangri-la here. Do you know who I was looking for inside? My lover. He’s only twenty-eight—a guy who fears nothing!”

Zhou Yizhen heard the lewdness in Zhu Mei’s tone. Ordinarily she wouldn’t be able to stand it. But in this kind of moonlight, this kind of atmosphere, she felt that everything was reasonable. The fifty-year-old Zhu Mei should love a twenty-eight-year-old. If she, Zhou Yizhen, were a young man, she would want to fall in love with Zhu Mei: Zhu Mei was a rare treasure.

“Oh, so that’s it. I’ve disturbed you. Don’t pay any attention to me. I’m leaving,” she said.

“No, don’t go!” Zhu Mei raised her hand and said decisively, “Since you’ve come out, I want to enjoy this evening with you. Look, the twilight is so beautiful!”

“Yes. Yes,” Zhou Yizhen murmured.

“We’ll go to the plant where you worked before. Now it’s been converted into shops selling a wide array of goods.”

Zhou Yizhen wanted to decline, because for twenty years she’d been afraid of running into her former workmates. But Zhu Mei pulled her along in that direction; Zhou Yizhen thought that Zhu Mei was warmly enthusiastic. Why was she so exuberant? Zhu Mei told Zhou Yizhen: before the plant went out of business, she had been a temporary worker there for two years. After that, all she could do was return to her old trade as a design assistant. She had earned some money in design the last few years, but she still cherished her time in the plant. As she talked, Zhou Yizhen recalled the lotus seeds and felt intensely emotional. Without thinking, she said, “Those days working in the plant were splendid!”

“See!” Zhu Mei shouted. “I read your mind, didn’t I? Even if a person goes only once to that sort of place, she never forgets it!”

When they reached the spot where the plant used to be, Zhou Yizhen saw that it had completely changed.

The workshops in the former plant were now small shops. There were colorful lamps everywhere, and people coming and going. Some of the shopkeepers looked familiar; they had worked at the plant. Some were unfamiliar. They welcomed Zhu Mei with open arms, but no one recognized Zhou Yizhen. The shops sold a variety of goods—kitchenware, appliances for lavatories, writing implements, metal fittings, children's shoes.

When Zhou Yizhen saw her former workmates, even though they didn't recognize her, she still felt happy. She thanked Zhu Mei inwardly, because she hadn't introduced her to these people and yet she was pleased that Zhu Mei had done this. She followed Zhu Mei and felt relaxed. A happy premonition arose within her.

Zhu Mei pulled Zhou Yizhen into a two-room shop selling chinaware. The shopkeeper was a middle-aged woman whom Zhou Yizhen didn't recognize. When she asked them to sit down, Zhou Yizhen thought she seemed familiar. Zhou Yizhen had no sooner taken a seat than the woman dragged Zhu Mei off to the other room and left Zhou Yizhen to watch over the chinaware.

After a while, several customers showed up all at once. Flustered, Zhou Yizhen wished that Zhu Mei and the woman would come out soon, but they remained in the warehouse in back.

An old man picked up a teakettle and asked the price. Zhou Yizhen replied that she wasn't the shopkeeper.

"If you aren't the shopkeeper, why are you standing here?" he reproached her. "You have to take the responsibility. Oh, I see the price. It's pasted on the bottom of the teakettle. It's twenty-three yuan."

He counted out twenty-three yuan, placed it on the counter, and headed out. As he left, he said angrily, "You're the worst businessperson I've ever seen."

Then a young woman picked up a vase and sought out Zhou Yizhen. Zhou Yizhen told her the truth and asked her to wait a moment, because the shopkeeper was in the other room. She looked inside the warehouse, but no one was there. A door opened from this room onto a small street. The other two must have gone out for a stroll.

She returned and told the young woman that the shopkeeper was out.

“But you’re here, aren’t you?” the young woman said, staring.

Then the young woman said she had found the price; it was thirty-seven yuan. She placed forty yuan on the counter, took the vase, and left. Zhou Yizhen put the money away at once.

Every person who came in bought something. The last customer wanted to bargain with Zhou Yizhen. He was holding a large soup bowl, and said fifteen yuan was too much. He asked Zhou Yizhen to sell it to him for ten yuan. Zhou Yizhen said the shopkeeper was out, and it wasn’t up to her to lower the price.

“Why can’t you? Didn’t you sell several things just now?” he said in a fierce tone.

Zhou Yizhen was afraid. She shouted toward the back room, “Zhu Mei! Zhu Mei!”

The man immediately said, “Don’t shout! Please! I’ll just put it back, OK?”

When he swept past her, Zhou Yizhen saw that he was her former gang boss. Back then, they had sat in the same workshop opening lotus seeds. Why had he threatened her?

Zhou Yizhen was angry with Zhu Mei. She put the money in a drawer under the counter, closed the shop door, and ran out.

All at once, she relaxed. She thought, she had come here just for fun. Why had Zhu Mei pressured her so much? Whatever happened in the chinaware shop was really a conspiracy. The surroundings had changed greatly, and there wasn’t much lamplight. Zhou Yizhen had actually lost her way outside the plant where she used to work. Just then, she heard someone call her name. She turned around and saw her former workmate Bai E. Except for her voice, this woman had changed completely. Even in the dim lamplight, one could see that her face was dark and that she was very thin, yet she seemed in good spirits.

“Zhou Yizhen, come to my house!” she said eagerly. “I live alone now. You can live in my home!”

She gripped Zhou Yizhen’s arm and dragged her to a low house next to the road. It was dark inside. The two of them almost fell onto a bed with a big mattress. Zhou Yizhen struggled to get up because she hadn’t taken off

her shoes. Bai E was still holding her tightly. She said there was no point in following any rules in her home. It was best to simply fit in.

"It's dark outside. Where can you go?" Bai E's voice turned eerie.

Zhou Yizhen stopped struggling and calmed down. A minute later, her eyes closed heavily. She felt a quilt being put over her. She could faintly hear Bai E arguing with someone outside.

When Zhou Yizhen awakened, it was daylight. She saw her former workmate Bai E sitting beside the bed, quietly watching her; she looked fascinated. Zhou Yizhen blushed; she wasn't accustomed to people looking at her so closely.

"Yizhen, we've finally met," she said.

"Yes. Finally," Zhou Yizhen responded in kind.

"I thought I wouldn't be able to wait for this day."

"Everything depends on luck," Zhou Yizhen said.

"No! That's wrong!"

Bai E stood up angrily, and began pacing back and forth in the room. She was agitated.

Zhou Yizhen made the bed, whisking the dust from the quilt. She waited for Bai E to explode.

But Bai E didn't lose her temper. Her anger was suddenly replaced by happiness, and she whispered: "I know you came over from Zhu Mei's place. As soon as you arrived at her home yesterday, everyone from the plant knew. Everyone was eager to see you. I got to you before anyone else!"

"If that's the way all of you felt, then why did everyone pretend not to know me in the small shops? I saw several of my former workmates," Zhou Yizhen said.

"Everyone was keeping an eye on everyone else. We had to pretend not to know you. We had to wait until night to take you by surprise and get hold of you. It's the way things are done here. I did it just this way, didn't I? All these years, we were curious. Everyone wanted to know how you had survived. You were everyone's hope."

After Zhou Yizhen washed her face and brushed her teeth, she sat down and ate breakfast with Bai E. Noticing that Bai E kept looking her up and down, she asked with a smile, “Is there something nice-looking about me?”

“I’m not looking at you, I’m looking at myself. When you left, you took my soul with you. I’ve been thinking all along: *People say that Zhou Yizhen didn’t die; she survived. What happened? I have to see her again.* Last night my dream came true.”

Zhou Yizhen felt inspired by these words. She got up and made a few birdlike motions. And then she was a little embarrassed again and said to Bai E: “If someone as inconspicuous as I am can get a new lease on life, then the rest of you surely can! I want to tell you that everyone can experience a turn for the better. But now I have to leave you. Zhu Mei must be waiting for me. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Good luck, Yizhen. And thank you for keeping me company. The scenery last night was beautiful. The deer ran so fast.”

Bai E’s gaze fell. She stared, dazed, at an oil stain on the tablecloth. She forgot all about Zhou Yizhen.

Not until Zhou Yizhen left Bai E’s home did she realize that Bai E’s home was on a quiet street. It was two blocks from Jixiang Lane. She intended to go there and say goodbye to Zhu Mei before going home. She felt happy and a little puzzled. She thought that she wouldn’t be able to put her thoughts in order until she got home. She had come to her old house and had encountered some novel things. The thing that surprised her the most was that the people here all considered her one of them, as though she—Zhou Yizhen—had lived among them all this time. Even the customers in the chinaware shop didn’t consider her any different from them. What on earth was the reason for this? Hadn’t she vanished from here twenty years ago?

In the daytime, Jixiang Lane looked tumbledown again. The courtyard houses she had seen yesterday were once more invisible. Piles and piles of detritus and sand were everywhere, as if the path was going to be repaired. A large pile of coal was in the middle of the lane. She had to walk around it, and her shoes got dirty. Zhou Yizhen thought that Jixiang Lane was disgusting now. No one was in the courtyard of her old home. Probably

everyone was at work. Zhu Mei and the woman shopkeeper from last night were sitting in the doorway, not at all surprised to see Zhou Yizhen. It seemed the two of them had spent the night in Zhu Mei's home.

"I put all the money for purchases in the drawer under the counter," Zhou Yizhen said. "I didn't dare do anything on my own in helping you with your business."

"It's all right! Never mind!" the woman interrupted Zhou Yizhen. "Your showing up was a pleasant surprise for us. Zhu Mei and I spent the whole night talking about you!"

"Talking about me?"

"Yes. You caused quite a stir in our circle. I'm leaving. Take good care of yourself! Bye!"

Zhu Mei and Zhou Yizhen watched her disappear into the courtyard.

"Zhu Mei, I've come to say goodbye. Visiting my old home has made me feel great, and it has enriched me too. But—I don't know how to put it—it seems I experienced everything here through a layer of gauze. Nothing was very clear. Now I feel excited, but I don't know how to explain that. Can you understand what I'm feeling?"

Zhu Mei stared straight at Zhou Yizhen, then nodded and said, "I understand you, Zhou Yizhen. If I didn't, then who would? I invited you to come, and you came. This was telepathy, wasn't it? Twenty years ago, I thought I could live as you did. Now the facts prove that I wasn't wrong. Let me see you off."

When they walked out of the courtyard, Zhu Mei said, "Your shoes are dirty. You must have taken the main road over here. Actually, there's a side path you could have taken."

"Oh, I see! No wonder I didn't see the courtyard houses. How could I get lost in my former neighborhood?"

"Of course that can happen. Come this way!"

Zhu Mei pulled Zhou Yizhen over, and the two of them went to the forked road. The courtyard houses appeared, and the main entrances stood open as they had the night before. Zhou Yizhen saw again the scene in the lane from last night. This was really a quiet little lane! When had it been built? She hadn't seen these courtyard houses before, and yet they looked

rather old. Where had they come from? Noticing Zhou Yizhen's puzzled expression, Zhu Mei began to laugh.

"Zhou Yizhen, you rescued me back then, and I've always wanted to repay you. After you left, I waited year after year for you to return, and now you have. Tell me: what is your impression of your old home?"

"I feel that both the people and the view have totally changed. This place used to be rather depressing. But I'm not very sure about this impression. Maybe I'm the one that used to be depressing. Since I came back yesterday, I've been constantly excited. People here have been so warm to me. But I can't understand them, even though I was with them every day in the past. Zhu Mei, can you tell me how to understand my former workmates?"

"You don't need to fully understand us. All you need is to feel our love, that's enough."

Zhu Mei had no sooner said this than the bus arrived. They embraced and said goodbye.

When the bus started, Zhu Mei waved to Zhou Yizhen.

"Come back often!" she shouted.

Zhou Yizhen was dazed as she stood in the bus. Right up until the bus stopped at the street corner and she got off and bought some vegetables at a nearby vegetable plot on the way home, her train of thought was stuck in her old house. She resolved to gradually disengage from any curiosity about that old home.

Untitled Original 11386i

Nathaniel Mackey

—"mu" two hundred thirty-sixth part—

As if I saw blood run down my neck, I
heard gurgling say, "Say something," the
blood. A fabled elsewhere the oud I played
es-
poused, an elsewhere's elsewhere the dou-
ble strings contrived. I stood in the center
of an eight-pointed star, side-eyed… Soon
it
seemed I schooled my oud on circumambi-
ence, a being-around or a being-about,
subject itself subject to qualm, semiquaver,
com-
plaint. I was the abandoned boy asking
what not being would be like, all the more the
more no one could answer, what would not
being be like… At the moment of letting go
one
would know, I was thinking, except not be-
ing there to know, except there being no one
to know. I was the abandoned boy again. Nur's
aggrieved whiteness gave me jitters. Why was it
we

who got schooled on notness, I was asking, we
whose we-the-people fell flat, we their we-the-
people landed on, they their own migrating we.
It
all bore me eastward, Trane at my side on so-
prano, waft so thick, the air so exact an attar,
we played our noses I thought… It was the dila-
tional sound of yore I knew and loved, dilational
tone
and buzz, burr, bite. We played ignoring the
line between anywhere and somewhere. Noncos-
micity gave ground, ceded the way as we had
our
way. Meant to charm snakes it might've been, so
open-throated I dreamt I bled. Next I knew
Leroy Jenkins joined us, bowing hard but going
no-
where, a utopic "nowhere" run… We played
keeping history at bay or it was history was what
we played. No matter I sat in a cage, we played
on
the line joining anywhere with somewhere, played
away the border between. I was in the school
of oud again, the abandoned boy wanting Nub's
cray-
fish, fretless play all I could
eat

———————————

My oud a Nativity goose, Trane's horn part
horn, part hookah, we played in a cage,
made to pledge allegiance. We were feeling
hap-
penstance's hand on our shoulders, the
we we'd be. We had taken a real trip, Trane
was heard to say, on a real ship, no matter
real
seemed up in the air, the realty prez's way
with fact what the matter was. We blew with
soup-cooler aplomb, unexcelled… Why the
bent
neck, I wondered, looking at my oud. Was
there just a record on the box I played along
with, I wondered, fighting back toe cramps
keep-
ing time with my foot. I wasn't fretless like
before… The weave went on without me or
with me but ragged. Trane and Leroy said it
was
okay. Why the bent neck,
I went on wonder-
ing

•

Into the mystery it would come to be seen
as, the deejay librarian held sway in the school

of oud. A hollow block of wood, a wooden

egg

I sat holding, I was exactly an orphan now.
Sad cage they were calling freedom, cage
we shedded in. Empathetic Leroy, empathetic

Trane

at the border, an empathetic serenade it seemed…
I played with an awkwardness they said was
true. An apt inability to advance Leroy called it, stu-
dent of "going nowhere" that he was. We were of

an-

other we, he told me, subject to summary slaugh-
ter, each an emir of nothingness, an under-
ness lighting our way. Better my axe's neck than

mine

I was thinking, the muse's hard look not unbe-
known to me… Bent necks were many I finally saw
it wanted to say, wrung necks of the lynched and

of

the otherwise disappeared. I hung my head the
longer I played, neck bent à la Picasso, goose-
necked. Blue noose, blue gnosis, blue impromptu

the

truth
was

It was Ohnedaruth's day again, truth be told,
blue Trane, blue truth, dark light in a dark
time, bent necks bent but not broke. Not to not
men-
tion Elvin knocking underneath, off to one
side. Song in a strange land long since, how now
not to sing except to sing tear it all a brand
new…
It was Ohnedaruth's day again, Leroy
brought in for the extension string meant, his
and mine and Jimmy's Hofriyati thread. It
was
Ohnedaruth's day rebe-
gun

No matter what else, I needed, like Wayne
said, not to think about music. I called
on thoughts of the hair within my lady's love
re-
gion, a koan of sorts, her ladyship such
as it was, nothing less likely there… I feasted
on paradox, of a mind for what was not,
wide-
eyed for what would not be seen, a late les-
son in notness grown motivic, a school of
di-

lation a-
gain

No neck bent but whose it no longer
was was me and my oud's dream of
success. Ovoid back more belly than
back,
not not to mention its rhyme with
jelly. A mystic remit we tested our teeth
with…
Madrigal briar,
breath

Days of Heaven

A. D. Jameson

A grown-up man not unlike me is trying to coax a struggling child into a box. That's badly phrased and only a single sentence in we are in need of starting over. The man is trying to make the child—a slender boy no older than seven—take a few steps inside a bunker half submerged in sand somewhere; it's on a lonely beach somewhere, possibly Spain. The bunker is concrete and squat and dark and full of cobwebs—it's presumably full of cobwebs, but this is a very safe presumption and if it isn't full of cobwebs, it's full of crabs. Also the bunker has no windows and no ventilation and must be stuffy, and why is this grown-up man who's presumably well educated and friendly and knows right from wrong intent on doing this curious thing? We assume he has his reasons. The child resists and he too has his reasons; humans are rational, after all. The child is shaking his head and trying to free his left arm from the grown-up's grip, which is holding him very tightly, being secured by grown-up muscles, and it's doubtful the boy will succeed. And so he's writhing and crying and being an all-around pest; you know how kids are. The bunker's heavy door is wide open but it is heavy and made of steel and no doubt after the child enters, if he enters, if he's foolish enough to enter, the man will swing the heavy door shut and that will be that. The man has promised not to do this, but the child suspects he's lying, and we suspect the man is lying, and I happen to know for a fact that the man is lying, and this comes as no surprise. All grown-ups lie. All children know this and yet they must rely on grown-ups, who are stronger than them, and meaner, and fickle, and come and go as they please, and do as they please, and are not subject to higher powers. And if they are, those higher powers are other grown-ups, and fickle and abstract and mysterious and absent. The child digs his heels in the sand and twists and turns and tries again to free his arm to no effect; he is merely chafing the skin that

encloses his wrist, and he cries and shouts but there is no one else who can hear and no one who'd come to his aid if they did. And he will weaken or relent, or else the man will lose his patience and grow more violent, and grab the child with both hands, or strike his face, or grab his legs, and thereby shove him into the bunker, or drag him in. Although if the grown-up enters the bunker there's always the chance that the child will manage to wriggle free, and knock the grown-up on his behind, and dart outside and with the very last of his strength swing the heavy door shut. But the grown-up isn't in any hurry; he seems to be toying with the child, enjoying the struggle, because he's much stronger. Even the weakest grown-up is stronger than a child; it's no fair contest. The grown-up could shove the child inside at any moment, so he must be after a different sort of pleasure, a different pleasure altogether. The child's afraid; the child is terribly afraid; the child is terrified, the way only children can be, because they are weak, and can't assume life is theirs to keep. And the pleasure that grown-ups take in inspiring fear like that strikes me as very cheap, because it's an easy fear to arouse; I rarely go days without scaring children, either intentionally or on accident. I find it more rewarding to scare adults, whose fear is more pleasant. But at the same time I understand what the grown-up's after.

Life's a bitch. For instance, once upon a time there were two lovers and they were happy being in love. They did almost everything together, they shopped and ate and bathed together, they went to the rodeo together, and one day they perished. Except that *perished* isn't the right word; custom dictates that I use another word, but *perished*'s the word I want to use and so I'll use it. From their remains grew a crooked tree, and on that tree grew a crooked fruit, and when it ripened thirteen years later, that fruit became a little boy. He is our neighbor now and he mows our lawn in the summer, and in the winter he shovels our drive. And he is as green as green can be; each time I see him, I do believe he's gotten greener. "Have you gotten greener?" I always ask him, and he buries his face in his hands and weeps with such force that the windows rattle, and the windows and walls of the garden shed buckle and shake. But I take a lot of pleasure in the asking, so I ask. I'm curious as to what he does on weekends, but not so curious that I come right out and ask him. I prefer to imagine that like most children he

disappears, that he goes off to the land of the interesting lizards—have you visited that land? Of course you have, but let me tell you all about it, because the pleasure is in the telling, and your memory isn't the best. It is a land of ideal lizards, each one more interesting than the last. Some of the lizards know how to fly, and some repair cars, and some can do complex sums in their heads. Others belch blood that leaves dark stains and smells like Coca-Cola used to, back in the day. And there are other lizards besides that, better and worse, but if I describe them in rigorous detail then we'll be at it all day, because there are more of them every second; they're constantly hatching out of eggs. Suffice to say, there are a lot of them and they're attractive. And children are always chasing after them, pulling their tails or tossing them back and forth like footballs, or batting at their bulging reptile eyes with sticks, or painting their toenails and scales different colors, and stuffing bubblegum down their throats. You must remember doing this. I saw you doing this, or doing something like this, back in the day. Your hair was billowing in the warm summer breeze—the sirocco, I think people call it—and you were muttering to yourself, arcane recipes you read in your grandmother's cookbook—elaborate dishes you'd never cook, because you could tell at a glance the results would be disgusting: meat loaf in aspic, minced veal in aspic, tuna noodle casserole in aspic. And you were wrong, or you were right, but let's not get into that at present because I happen to know for a fact that you're a good cook, although you can only make three dishes. But you are good at those three dishes, which I like. Either way, you once were a child and you disappeared every Friday evening into the land of ideal lizards, where you saw a lot of lizards, and you did things with the lizards, and now you've forgotten what you did, but I remember, and this is why you're so frightened of lizards. You think they despise you and that they are dreaming of taking revenge. Which they probably are.

But none of this gets at what I really want to tell you, which is what happened to our good friends Thomas and Janice. Remember them? It's quite all right if you do not. We knew them a century ago, when we were still living in Bloomington-Normal and yes, all right, it wasn't a century ago, but that's what it feels like. I swear I'm much older than you think and you have to admit that when I first met you I let slip—I didn't mean to, but

out it drooled—that I'm not human, that I am something other than human, something primordial and perturbed, something inhuman and nonhuman and inhumane—there isn't a word that really captures what I am, that nails down my essence. So when I say that I feel older than you, or that time doesn't pass for me at the same rate it does for a mortal like you, you have to know that there is something behind my words, some truth to my statement. But let's quit talking about that because I'm getting distracted, and you know how I get whenever I get distracted; it never goes well for the neighbors' children or their Chihuahua or the goldfish I keep in the sink. Or our wedding album. Janice and Thomas, have you recalled them? Can you perform the incantation that causes their faces to swim to mind, can you picture their faces? Maybe you can, and maybe you can't. After all it was centuries ago in Blormal, a place that I hope will be wiped from the globe by time and disease and financial crises and Republicans and an asteroid and the sterile fire of God, should that malignancy ever return. But at the moment Blormal's still present; its people still shuffling back and forth along on Jefferson Boulevard, where we lived in our little house, or else in the downtown of Normal proper, reading the *Pantagraph* at the Coffeehouse and lining up for films at the refurbished movie theater, and riding banged-up bikes on the nature trail, the Constitution Trail, looking out of control but still managing not to hit you. I've set the scene and now it's all coming flooding back, recollection trickling into your brain like cottage cheese that's being pressed through a sieve, a milky white substance with air bubbles calmly rising in it, and those air bubbles are the fragile things we call memories. And two of those bubbles are Janice and Thomas, working late in the State Farm office that stands in downtown Bloomington proper like the priapus of a giant elder god who died in his sleep while he was sleeping on his back in the midst of a cornfield, eons ago. Janice and Thomas were working one evening as the sun set, the radioactivity of that star painting the western side of the State Farm Insurance building crimson orange, as is so common in the evening in the heartland. Janice and Thomas were the only two left in the office and as many as forty-five minutes had passed in silence when Thomas asked Janice a fateful question. And here you have to imagine the voice of a middle-aged man destroyed by decades

of Marlboro Lights and shots of bourbon chased by cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon, treats that Thomas permitted himself every night and sometimes during the daytime, during work, Thomas believing them his due:

"Say!" (This is Thomas speaking to Janice; make sure you're doing the raspy voice!) "Would you like to come over Thursday evening? Missy and I"—that's Missy O'Mally, Thomas's girlfriend of seventeen months—I hope you didn't think Janice and Thomas were an item; they're coworkers and we used to work with them, do you really not remember this? But I apologize for giving the wrong impression; I should be more precautious with you, really handle you with kid gloves as they say, that's gloves that were made out of baby goats, dead baby goats, slaughtered baby goats, their skin is perfect for making gloves, and they're the right kind of gloves for you. Thomas who never so much as kissed Janice was saying to Janice: "Missy and I are having some college friends over for dinner Thursday night, and as sure as you're born, it would delight us to introduce you to the whole lot. I've already told them a lot about you."

"Really?" asked Janice.

"As sure as you're born," repeated Thomas, who tended to overuse any phrase that he thought clever. "Tim and Bridget and Francis and Carol. And they've decided that they hate you, absolutely loathe your guts. They'd love to meet you, and humiliate you, and mock you, and spit in your face until your face is covered with spit, can't hold more spit, then spit some more, and then some more. And then I was thinking that we could run you through with a poker, and disembowel you, and dismember you, chop you up into little bits, and grind those bits up in a blender, or else our brand-new garbage disposal, except for your organs, which we'll barbecue and eat with dipping sauces for our meal."

Janice was tempted by Thomas's offer. She was tempted to accept. She didn't have very many friends, and those she had never asked her to dinner. So this was a banner day for Janice. You must remember what she was like, constantly sniveling and blowing her nose and making excuses for herself and crying profusely. We used to laugh at her whenever she left the room, and we sure as hell never invited her over for dinner at our place. "Well, I will see if I am free," is what our darling good friend Janice sweetly said.

She knew she'd be hungry come Thursday evening, that she'd be trapped fast in hunger's jaw, that she'd be pinned by the bleached teeth of hunger, and that there'd be no food in the fridge. "I have to warn you, though," she continued—and this is so typical of Janice, always continuing just when you thought she'd finished speaking—"that I've been busy as of late, thanks to the coming holiday season." And here she was totally telling the truth, also typical of Janice: it was in fact the holiday season. Arbor Day was in three more weeks, and she was working her tight little tush off on a project for State Farm, seeing if she couldn't invent an odorless gel that she could slip in a person's coffee to make them anxious and want to pay more for their insurance premiums, like a thousand times more. I'd tell you the science if I happened to understand it, but I don't, and I never will; I didn't study math in college. It's more important to describe what Janice was wearing, what bits of fabric she'd adorned herself with that day. How else can you properly picture this scene? Make notes if you need to: Janice was wearing a white-and-blue polka-dot cotton dress that did her body no real favors, as well as tights with sparkles in them, which was definitely a mistake. She'd swept her strawberry-blonde hair back with bobby pins that she had scavenged in the street. And of course she was wearing evening gloves to hide all the scars on her hands and forearms, but I don't have to tell you that, because that's her defining characteristic. (Have I mentioned that I hate her?)

"Of course," said Thomas, who for his part was wearing a tracksuit. I've never met anyone who loved tracksuits more than Thomas. He wore nothing but, even when cruising down the highway, pushing his candy-apple red Lamborghini to and past the limit, rocketing off to DeKalb and Peoria and Decatur to sell life insurance. He wore tracksuits even when going to church, even when representing himself in divorce court against his ghoul of a wife, even when working out at the gym (well, that makes sense), even when singing karaoke, even when huddled in the corner, alone and despondent, drunk and depressed, covered with cobwebs and downing his seventh Pabst Blue Ribbon for the evening. And even when laboring after hours at the office; his fondness for tracksuits was one of his many eccentricities that cannot be explained by modern science, no matter how

many expensive lasers they aim at our brains. “I get what you’re saying. But if you cannot attend this Thursday, then perhaps some other time.” (Don’t forget to do the voice! You’re not doing the voice!)

“I’ll certainly see what I can do,” Janice assured him, and you’ll remember how she was always assuring people, though they rarely were assured. “Your friends sound cool and really worth meeting—smarter than you, and far less boring.” Janice was thinking—here we are privy to her thoughts, a special privilege that we should treasure—“You most divine heavenly cow of a man, how can it be that until now I never thought of trying to slip my hand inside your sweatpants’ elastic waistband? For you are glittering in the sunset like a silver loving cup.” This you will doubtless find perplexing until I remind you that Janice always had a thing for abusive men, men who threatened to chop her up into little bits, men who preyed upon her fervent love of hockey, instilled by a father who drank Jim Beam and beat his daughters if his favorite team, the Flyers, didn’t win the Stanley Cup, which they so often didn’t. Poor desperate Janice, poor delirious and pathetically lonesome Janice. I never liked her—I always hated her, tell the truth—but even still I’m not so unhuman that I can’t be moved by the grim pathos of her delusions. I may be an ancient malicious demon, but I still weep when confronted by persons such as that.

In fact I was so moved on her behalf, let me tell you what I did. And here you’re getting an extra-special bonus insight because this is not yet public knowledge. Our old friend Thomas, he who wore nothing but tracksuits no matter what he was doing, our old friend Thomas no longer counts among the living. I strangled the arrogant bastard last week, I got so offended on poor frumpy Janice’s behalf. Because Lord knows she wasn’t ever going to do it, she’d never do anything with him, neither kiss him nor screw him nor kill him, despite his very real threat of bringing about her demise with his college friends (whom I’ll decline to describe in detail; suffice to say they are no more than leeks). What happened was I crept up from behind while he was drinking a Pabst Blue Ribbon, his sixth of the evening, and I positioned my callused hands around his neck, and then I squeezed, then squeezed some more, then squeezed some more, until he had no more breath left inside him, and breathed his last. Then he expired and toppled

over and he expired on the floor, the floor of the bar, a sticky surface that nobody looked at because they were drunk, which is what people are in bars, that's why they go to bars in the first place, they go to drink alcohol and not have to look at floors, which is why bars are sordid places. Then I dragged Thomas out by his ankles and nobody noticed because again they were totally drunk, they had no idea what was going on, and that is why many consider drunkenness a sin. And I weighted Thomas's tracksuited body down with copies of books that I'd been given by author friends that I had little interest in reading. The worst thing by far about being a writer is that people send you their books, and not even real books, but galley copies, uncorrected proofs that they want you to read and review, and that you can't even sell for credit at your neighborhood used bookstore, because the galleys say right on their covers, "Not for resale." And of course you don't want to read these books because your friends don't know how to write. Maybe one of them does for each dozen writer friends. It's the pits. So I am always looking for things to do with these galleys, like seeing how tall a stack I can make with them, or throwing them hard as I can at passing cars, or weighting down the bodies of people whom I've strangled and want to dump in the nearest river. And so it was that Thomas drifted to the bottom of Bloomington's shallow Sugar Creek accompanied by a bumper crop of small press offerings I'll discreetly decline to name. The water was low that time of year and I have to admit that I'm surprised that no one has stumbled across his body—I mean, his corpse was barely submerged. But nobody seems to have missed the fellow, not even Missy, his so-called girlfriend of seventeen months, or the folks at the bar he was keeping in business. And just a few days ago the thin blue line of Bloomington discovered a rotting body, but it was somebody else's corpse and they don't know who it was, on account of its missing a face.

But as I was saying, here and now—that boring evening in the priapus that is State Farm—Janice was lusting after Thomas, and considering his offer. A familiar face filled her vision, the familiar face of hunger. She'd eaten that day—she ate every day; she was exceedingly clever that way—but from her experience she knew that, come Thursday evening, she would have to eat again. So she was tempted. But something about the way

Thomas was acting deeply upset her, it mixed her up, and not knowing how else to respond, she struck his honey-colored mug with the fat of her hand, and it proved a doozy of a blow. Janice had been working out after work, the tricky gosling. Indeed, she didn't know her own strength. The strike caught Thomas by surprise, knocking him backward onto the floor, the linoleum floor, the unswept and unmopped linoleum floor, where he at once started getting filthy. You can imagine the bacteria that started crawling on him and reproducing. As for her own part, crying, Janice clumsily fled to the nearest custodial closet, where she consoled herself by reading the complex ingredients in the many cleaning solutions that were stored there. We should show some respect for her feelings and permit her to take a breather.

OK, that's more than enough time for Janice. But she still hasn't emerged from the closet. Maybe she's getting OSHA-compliant, scrubbing her forehead with foaming hand soaps, or squirting Windex into her hair, or trying on overalls and galoshes and vinyl gloves. That might be a good look for Janice; it might make her look very nice. Or maybe she's taking out her frustrations on her fingers, bending her pinkies back until they snap in half, like the medieval jailers did. I never followed the lady home and couldn't tell you what she was into, but she was obviously into something, poor old Janice, poor old unhappy, impoverished Janice. I never liked her as I've mentioned more than once; she was a mess but it wasn't her fault, not entirely her fault. Her bones fit together much too snugly and her joints grated when she walked, producing a high-pitched shriek you heard without knowing what it was, a whine tucked away in the back of your mind that you barely realized was there and that you sure as hell couldn't drown out with other sounds. Which was very aggravating.

Speaking of which, did I tell you about the play I watched? Last Saturday afternoon, in one of the underground theaters for which the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago is justly famed. The first half was boring and I didn't like that half. I got so bored that I got up to poke around backstage, inspecting the ropes and pulleys and bridges everywhere. There was more stuff than I thought any theater needed, but it was a secret professional theater and they must know what they're doing. I did some theater as a

child but that was a thousand years ago and I've mostly forgotten my training and can't claim expertise.

In the second half of the play, a person, Garoo, was beating his friend. This intrigued me. Garoo was wearing a ratty bathrobe that kept coming loose. The sash, I mean, kept coming untied. And the bathrobe was covered in eucalyptus and menthol stains. Garoo had a thing about eucalyptus, kept smearing his face and hands with this gel that came in unlabeled sample bottles. In the first half of the play, he had a monologue where he swore—but only half jokingly, I think—that he'd been a koala in a past life. And in the second half he kept hitting and kicking his friend, Aaron Alexander, who just went by Alexander, and the beating looked so real that I worried for Alexander's sake. I thought his skull might split in half, and that his brain might come flying out, and plop on the stage, and no longer work. I don't know how they made the violence look so convincing.

I'll back up and tell you about Garoo, who looked like cheese. He looked a hell of a lot like cheese, an awful lot like some strange Swiss-cheddar-Colby blend. He had yellow-orange skin and an overall mushy look, as though if you squeezed him, grabbed his forearm and really gave it a squeeze, his flesh would come apart in clumps in your hands. Plus he emitted a cheesy aroma. It was difficult to distinguish in his case the regular pungent human odor from, say, a Camembert or a Brie or a Vieux Boulogne. Garoo was sensitive about this, quick to freak out if you asked him if his mother had been a cheese, or if you simply mentioned cheese, or simply said anything that sounded too much like a cheese pun. He'd push his cheesy face up in your face and scream till white spittle flew out of his mouth, spit like shredded mozzarella, while thick sweat oozed down his puffy cheeks like melting Velveeta. And then he'd threaten to punch your face and kick your shins. And you might wonder whether this soft cheese of a man would follow through on either threat, or cause any damage if he did; that's fair enough. I don't know for certain but I wouldn't press my luck: some parts of his body had a rind, and I imagine those parts could scratch you, or give you a rash.

Alexander was close friends with Garoo and chose his words extremely carefully and never mentioned cheese. He was a vegan and a gentleman. So

why did Garoo flip out and attack him? Well, our coagulated friend accused Alexander of "licing his socks"—that's dumping handfuls of lice in his socks—right before the intermission. He leaped on a table and pointed his finger, which looked like a cheese curd, right in Alexander's direction, and screamed in a voice like *queso fundido*, "You put tons of lice in my Smartwool socks, the pricey ones from REI!" Then the curtain tumbled down and I did my snooping around backstage, which took me a while and by the time I got back to my seat, Act II had started, and Garoo was busy whaling away at Alexander. I asked my neighbors what I'd missed, and they said nothing so far but fighting. The tussle went on for a good long while, looking disturbingly real, as I've mentioned. Meanwhile, people appeared onstage behind the fight, background extras, lithe men and women in blue-gray leotards and tights and papier-mâché masks that looked like fish. These dancers bobbed up and down and looked back and forth very quickly, producing a singular effect, as though the stage were slowly flooding, the fight occurring underwater. And all of those pulleys I'd seen went to work, lowering oversized starfish and clams, and oysters and lobsters, as well as a mermaid combing her hair and actual jellyfish, en masse onto the stage, until the undersea illusion was complete. Then all the lights dimmed and the curtain came down very slowly, extremely slowly, and that was the end of Act II and the play for all I cared. I'd lost any interest.

I ripped up my ticket and went for a walk down Logan Boulevard, the knife that runs through the heart of Logan Square. I heard the drunken owls hooting and the moonlight scream my name but I didn't stop; I already knew what nature wanted. Every window in every building on Logan B. was shot out or broken, long lethal shards of glass coating the sidewalk. I made a mental note about that; someone would have to sweep them up. What gets done with all those broken shards of glass is beyond me. I've heard that truly desperate Chicagoans grind them up and try to snort the powder like cocaine, and you can imagine how that goes—it's why the gutter is full of blood. Others melt them down in order to make new glass, a complex process they call *fornication*.

My mind was beating a mile a minute, as restless as a rhino getting Tasered. The earth felt alive beneath my feet, which might have had

something to do with the earthworms. All my life, I've had the suspicion that earthworms will mutate and enlarge and grow poisoned fangs, then smash through the pavement, thick as forearms, and start chasing us, like giant killer elongated boogers. Or else the trees will take their revenge for all they've suffered. I've recently learned that when people climb trees, they're trying to reach an ornate gem that nonetheless manages to elude them, but that's not my point: the trees don't care for such behavior, and they want to harm us, all of us people, which is why they're planning to strike us with their branches, and stuff their needles and pine cones and fruits (if they produce fruits) and nuts and seeds up everyone's nostrils. But if you die in your sleep before August 17, 2019, you won't have to deal with any of this, and in the meantime I'm still considering what to do with this explosive information.

I got to thinking about a cartoon I used to watch, starring a man named Saul the Gaul. In this one episode that's always haunted me, Saul befriends an imp that wore a gargoyle mask and proudly displayed its mangled sex to half the nation. This was how that imp caught people, overly curious civilians that it stored in plastic boxes. It serenaded the people it trapped with delicate songs about skunks in love while its captives slowly starved. The imp insisted those deaths weren't its fault. Saul meanwhile was determined to strangle a bear, believing that feat well within his cartoon capacity.

All this and more was on my mind while I trudged along Logan Boulevard, past New Wave Coffee, past the Starbucks, en route to the overpass at Western, and then the Target and the Lathrop Homes beyond that. It's odd where one's mind disappears to at dusk, oozing out of the skull through the grotesque eye in the back of one's head, and alighting on northerly winds like a flaming crystal eagle. It flies to the forces beyond our control, the gods who can play with our minds as they wish, give our brains sponge baths or massage them with their feet. We couldn't stop them if we tried, even if we knew this was going on, which of course we do not. It's like this is happening in our sleep and all our memories are like boogers—long, stringy earthworms dangling freely from a random stranger's nose. You try to hand the stranger your handkerchief but he or she ignores you,

more concerned with questions you don't know how to answer, like "When a celebrity signs a baseball surely it raises that baseball's value, but by how much?" And then your Amazonian boss strides up to your cubicle and demands a finished report on which of the cardinal numbers are "the squiggliest" and you open your mouth to respond, but find you've forgotten what numbers are, and you can't say.

Soppy, sweet Janice is still barricaded inside that janitorial closet, doing who knows what amidst the mops and the mousetraps and the sponges, and I think we have to conclude that she's not coming out. She's disappeared, just like a child escaped to the land of ideal lizards. Janice is still young enough to go there if she wants, if she tries with all her heart and if the lizards are feeling gracious. So let's imagine that they are because that's a very pleasant thought. Janice has nothing to live for on this side of the divide, so she might as well spend the remainder of her days among the lizards, learning their language and helping them lay their eggs and reboot their routers and modems—they have their own internet and it's blisteringly fast, much faster than any network we've built. Janice could study to be an information technician, and barring that, she could scoot around patting all the lizards on their heads, if they happen to like that. It's not the career I'd choose for myself but I've had better options, opportunities both educational and financial, while Janice has always been handed squat. Fortune avoided her like a biker on a trail, so maybe she's better off turned green and eating quiche—if you live on that side, your skin turns green, and there is nothing to eat but quiche. But why am I telling you any of this? You've been there yourself, and you know more about the lizards than I ever could. We won't be seeing Janice again so I hope you imagined her very clearly, got an eyeful.

And as for the child, the one on the beach, I'd nearly forgotten all about him. And now I've forgotten all about him. I hope he got free, that things went well for him and badly for the man who was trying to trap him. Fiction should always follow the law and bring its evildoers to justice. So let's agree that's exactly what happened: the child escaped and the grown-up got stuck inside his own trap, got locked inside that dark concrete bunker. He's now sitting quietly on the sand, reflecting on how the thing he

did was exceedingly wrong. He has nothing to eat and as the day comes to an end, he's growing chilly. He might have to spend a few more days all on his lonesome, as well as a few more days after that, as much as a week. Maybe in seven days' time he'll have learned a significant lesson and vowed to turn over a new leaf. And if not, well, who really cares? The world is full of losers and fools and if he wants to join their ranks, he's welcome to do so. We can ignore him for years, for centuries if need be. We have so many others to think about and inspect. Like Margaret and Sheila: Margaret was showing Sheila her new mask, a lightweight object made of yarn. She could attach it to her face by means of small silver hooks she'd inserted into her bones. "My old mask was pinching too much," she explained, "but this new one, being sateen, is looser." Gaily she modeled the delicate good and wouldn't you know it, Margaret wasn't lying to Sheila. There was a certain truth to that.

The Fisherman Bombardier of Naval Station Norfolk

A Performance in Four Generations, Three Races, and Too Many Genders to Name

Quintan Ana Wikswo

—For Jean Genet, Aimé Césaire, and Rose LaRose

In this mariner's damp the lichen sprouts, or rather creeps, in the manner molds and kisses do, prurient. Slightly closer then farther toward and away from their undisclosed destination. Investigating, guarded, but unwilling to cease from exploration.

Sun, perhaps, is for the suicidal ones. And the rotten logs are for the whore molds—whore spores of all kinds, honorable and excoriable, seductive and repulsive, venal and venereal and Venetian, Vesuvian, Venusian, exquisitely fantastic whores—some with scales, some with soft, striped skin, slick.

After all, for centuries the navy ran a red-light ghetto here called the Pussy Stockade, inhabited by many of my ancestors, who were rich until they died, highly venereal. And I owe them something, a stalking, a haunting, along the decaying quay at sunset. I have come here to investigate, in my way, the lichen that I feel slips from my viscera in the darkness. Quays and whores and sailors make fine company as ghosts. All dripping wet, all specters of the slimy sea.

And it was in that way, driven by curiosity, I went walking on the quay at sunset, where good things never happen, depending upon the interpretation

of goodness as asset or as liability. I am wearing a preposterous reproduction of a nineteenth-century courtesan corset and a hoop skirt.

There is a why for this, and I shall elaborate.

The sense of the perpendicular rib cage comforts me. When I am walking on the quay at sunset I know that my ribs are encased by other ribs, prone, recumbent, the secretive grave ribs of the Norfolk whores in my family. Supine, and as disquisitive about me, I suspect, as I am about them. But to a questioning bystander I would of course reply that the baroque aristocractic decadence of my corsetry is instead a matter of practicality—they are utilitarian even, because I have slipped on the slimy stairs and fractured my spine, and without the corsets I am instructed to lie on my back—otherwise the ripped tendons and ligaments and tiny slivers of bone would return to the celestial brew of heavy elements and fetid slime, hidden tastefully beneath bruised skin.

Why have bruises become so fascinating in this context? Their near spectral appearance—the surprise one doesn't expect after impact, yet knew all along was coming. The fifth horsewoman, an Amazon, is the bruise; only one breast, and sharp points in her quiver. Violet, chartreuse, dead blood are the colors of licentiousness and mildew. Erotic in its refusal to comply, yet its malleability. There is the curiosity of what will emerge from a wound that initially leaves no trace. There is the knowledge that a future examination is forthcoming. The flesh remains full and soft, and its darkly nacreous sneer reminds one that as sweet and wounded as it may seem, it will remain until it decides itself to depart. Typically in a follicular haze of mustard, a chlorine gas held tight beneath the skin.

And this corset is violet and rose madder shot silk, as they used to say here during the various wartime embargoes, when privateers smuggled the prized silk from Paris on pain of being shot. And it is totally inappropriate attire for the quay at sunset in a naval town on the day the NATO aircraft carrier comes home from the Barents Sea. This century, at least, I feel the

obligation to haunt—after all, the Russians have returned. We are repeating history, and I feel obligated to ritualize the repetition.

Why walk Genet's quay looking for a love fight if I can't do so tied into vertical strips of steel? I am an iron-clad battleship armed with tits. The steel bands run perpendicular to my fractured ribs, but no one need know that except for my dog, the Brussels griffon bred to belong in a courtesan's carriage in the Bois de Boulogne like any other undersized Belgian ratcatcher who looks cute in his wee goatee until one feels his fangs.

And combat boots nearly to my thighs, too large by far, and inappropriate because I know of no other way to behave except inappropriately when I intend humanity only good. When I intend humanity only good, I haunt it with the most humane of traps. I am mistaken for a ghost. They fall into the netherworlds of time, they flail, I watch and like any wayward Gretel they are rewarded before being kindly savored with a spoiled Madeira and returned to the twenty-first century, only slightly damaged.

There is no other worthy digestif for such occasions.

*

Along the quay I encounter a fisherman. He attracts my scrutiny due to his posture—one that was at first trained to cringe and then to stand upright, at attention, with pride. A spine rehabilitated, perhaps, from a position of feeling fear to one of causing fear. He comes to the quay in his own war that is not his war. Fighter jets and Seahawk helicopters constantly overhead and he says before he turned the fifty years he is today he was a bombardier but it's not true. He's in his eighties or nineties but with an enticing force of will.

He comes to this quadrant of the quay for several reasons, but at least for this much: these are the houses of the naval officers' wives of the surrendered Confederacy, grand and glorious yet their ghostly snubs will not protect them from rising seas or from the fisherman bombardier: despite

their signs that say no fishing near the estates, there is no method by which a black man who is also a fisherman who is also eighty who is also a bombardier airman could be stopped from exploring the possibilities for instilling discomfort. This draws me to him, our common goal of pushing at the soft places to see how deep the finger goes.

I don't need to ask. I see the blondes run past and avert their eyes yet mine are drawn to his and his to mine. We are seeking the spine within the slime we both know that we contain. He doesn't need to ask. I'm the only one who speaks to him at dawn and twilight. He and I are the ones from whom haughty matrons step aside. And he and I know that it has always been so, and we can push them into stumbling should we so desire. I suspect this of him, as he does of me, and we watch them with a dominance that they feel we have not earned, and yet he knows, and I know, that we have. We are here to figure out the compulsion of it, on all sides. But this investigation is clandestine—he is cloaked as a fisherman, and I am daggered.

Perhaps this—and other factors—push us together.

*

He comes here because he likes to catch gaspers. I ask him, *Why are they called gaspers* and he says, *Watch*, and gives me the half-smoked Newport cigarette that was between his lips, rips the head from a rotten prawn, and casts his line into the harbor until a pale, bloodless, glistening thing, a fish that is the child of moons, emerges on his hook.

The fisherman bombardier, deft with his fingers—how could he be otherwise—unhinges its jaw with a faint but potent crack and the fish gasps.

As though it has been fondled in the night by German mustard gas.

Listen, says the fisherman bombardier, *a gasper*. The thing snaps its spine against his bucket until it's dead. I design a corset for the gasper. One with more flexible metal stays.

*

He comes here because the men-of-war chase the fish into his hooks. The gossamer haints and ghouls of the Atlantic, jellyfish who trail veils behind them, seem still beloved by Tennessee Williams, once a regular at the brothels here, languorous and white and startling, floating lazily in the sea. When they wrap the gasper in their electrical embrace it is shocked with the sear of pain and flips itself into the air, which it cannot breathe for gasping.

When it falls, exhausted, it is into the fetid, baited hooks of the fisherman bombardier.

*

The storm moves in and visibility is low and my anachronistic yet more appropriate than any other option shot-silk corset is getting wet, as it should, because I'm here to see what happens to a wormhole woman on a naval quay at night. Overhead the jets move fast and low as he talks to me. I can't hear a word he says, just his lips moving: lips that at eighty years old are anything but innocent. Anything except ignorant. Not here. Not now. And while I watch his lips move and no sound makes its way to me because the fighter jets, the fighter jets, the fighter jets, the fighter jets, the fighter jets, the fighter jets, the fighter jets. A Seahawk. The fighter jets. The fighter jets.

They are returning from the aircraft carrier that is returning from classified exercises in an enigmatic Baltic deployment that is returning from the Barents Sea that is returning from the ghoulish grimaces of the gulag skeletons of my Russian ancestors who should by rights and honor have eaten each other alive in the camps rather than reproduced.

So often it is the same thing.

And the fisherman's lips are still moving but there are so many fighter jets I can relax a while, nodding and watching the electrocutions, because I see

the ghost of my Great-Grandfather Lafayette, named after the great general. My Lafayette used to walk this quay with his half brother, of darker skin, who because of that had no name in the white half of the family Bible, and who because of that had no name in the black half of the family Bible, but together they looked for tricks to turn for sailormen along the Norfolk quay, where I am now, except my ancestors put out and I don't, and they were dying of syphilis and I won't.

*

And the fighter planes have passed and now the old fisherman bombardier is snapping open cracking open the jaw of a perfectly acceptable cock-sized gasper and he says, *Quintan is a man's name*.

Yes, I say. He gives me a seasoned side-eye and squeezes the fish in a way that is ancient and expert. He is eighty or maybe more. He knows how it is done. *My name is Lesley*, he says. *Hello, Lesley*, I say, and give him the pause for effect he's been hoping for but refuse him the satisfaction he seeks. I want to watch what I know will happen next. *It's a girl's name*, he says. And I reply, *Yes it is*. He pauses. *Do you have a husband, Quintan?* he asks. *I have three; technically, four, but they're nobody who matters,* I say. *With any luck they're dead and without luck at least I'm divorced*.

Ah, he says, *so it's just you and the dog on your own.*

Yes, I say.

Oh good, he says, and throws the gasper back into the sea for the jellyfish to consume. It was too small for him.

He asks if I go to church. *I love the Lord,* he says.

No, I say, *I don't go to church. I love the Lord but mine is older than yours.* I see a glitter of anger split his eyes of brine then flash away. I relent. I was unkind, and he was hoping we could bond over something closer to the

surface—here we realize there are too many possibilities as to what—than our secrets slinking away from inquisition in the brine.

I go to shul, I say, and he eyeballs my attire and says, *Really now. The woman with the man's name and no decent clothes on is a good Jew,* he says, *Jews*, he says, shaking his head in contempt and in the metal bucket the gaspers echo and echo their doomed inhalations.

I have a woman's name, he says. *I could come over to your house and cook you a gasper if you can get a pair of lemons.*

Maybe so, I say, *but definitely not.* Definitely not.

It's at this point that my great-grandfather and my half great-uncle turn around and grin at me, dark skinned in the shadows, from mouths without flesh. Sailors and sex have never been conventionally heterosexual. They urge me to bend the rules a bit, like they have, hybrids, black and white, male and female, Jewish and Christian, in discomforting ways that had no taxonomical name.

But I am on the quay for different reasons. I tell my ancestors this man wouldn't give me money because I'm a Jew and he hates us. They shrug their shoulder bones—it's all they have left to shrug.

Eh, they say, *love, hate, just move along, we all wake up for a reason until we don't.*

The crepe myrtle blossoms, an absurd pink, fall into my hair. Genet and his flowers, the syphilitic sores that would have been incubating on the palms of my ancestors, and I'm listening to warplanes again, wanting the bombs to drop. The fisherman bombardier was likely gifted at his art, and well trained. Were black soldiers allowed to drop bombs on white Europeans? It seems unlikely when the matrons' distaste is fully assessed, and yet many did. Droppers of bombs in a war that was deemed more righteous than the

one that needed to be dealt with back in the South. *Eh,* say my ancestors, holding hands of curiously different hues, *love, hate, just move along.*

Regardless, even at eighty his salty wet hands don't shake as he slaps a new gasper against his thigh.

Walk on, dog, I say. And the rain falls more angrily than ever and I don't blame it at all. I would if I could. The embrace of the electric jumps and arcs just beneath the surface of the corset stays.

The Wanting Beach

Lynn Schmeidler

Our mother—gull tattooed across her chest, wishbones for hairpins—told us never to go to the Wanting Beach. She had. We thought this explained her eyes. They looked at you and you contracted. Something inside you was sucked out and gone. No one looked our mother in the eye more than once.

But we were girls, models of curiosity. All three of us. We didn't listen. We each wanted a particular boy, so we went to the Wanting Beach with a thread from their sleeves, a wad of gum they'd spat on the road, a pebble they'd kicked. We were tracing their initials in the sand with our big toes when three shadows fell over our feet, and we looked up to see their shoulders at our lips.

"What's this?" said their voices in our hair.

We were embarrassed and so continued to write as if it were not initials, but different secret wishes we were spelling in words, but every next letter pulled us deeper into our want. Then they bent and each put a hand over one of our feet and looked up at us, so we saw our mistake. The Wanting Beach was not where you went to get what you wanted. It was the beach that wanted. The beach wanted and wanted and filled us with its want until we were nothing but bottomless want buckets impossible to fill.

We wanted these boys and these boys wanted us, but you cannot want and also have. The boys saw their mistake too. Their eyes kept taking bits of us, and our eyes kept taking bits of them. And so we stayed like that, looking into each other's eyes, taking as much as we lost until we were empty of we and they were empty of they. And when they were full of we and we were full of they, the tide turned and the wanting reversed—we wanting we back from them and they wanting they back from us. On the Wanting Beach everything was always shifting, aching, piling wrack lines of nets and bones and broken sparkling things.

Getting to the Wanting Beach was easy, like finding dimes in a soda machine. Leaving was harder. We could not find our shoes in the moonless night, and we lost our sense of direction. We wandered, first holding hands with the boys, then holding hands with each other, finally holding our own hands behind our backs until the sun beiged the black sand and we found a path through the panic grass leading home.

Our mother was smoking on the front stoop when we arrived. Everything about her was clenched. Smoke curled from her fingers like they were coals, and behind us we could feel the horizon disappear. "We didn't think …," we began. But before we could finish, she turned her back and went inside. Our mother always knew what we were going to say before we said it. We watched her disappear down the hall in a ripple of heat and realized she had nothing to give us.

That night for dinner our mother served a new dish for our new selves: "Welsh rarebit," she said, placing a steaming yellow mess on the lazy Susan. She looked like an idea of a mother. We cried as we ate, because we thought it was rabbit—so creamy and velvet—and because there would never be enough.

The next week want was taught in every class. In French—*je veux*, I want, was corrected for politesse to *je voudrais*, I would like, but it tasted the same in our mouths. In history, wanting was blamed for the war. In science, an experiment proved subjects who'd recently eaten salt perceived a glass of water as closer than subjects who'd just drunk to their contentment. Conclusion: what you want appears closer than it is.

Since visiting the Wanting Beach, our stomachs ached and our knees looked like faces. We woke, palms sweating, in the middle of the night; small red bumps appeared under our shirts, ringing our waists in itch. We wanted so much, our throats burned. We wanted devotees; we wanted the big, loud world beating around us, vibrating our ribs; we wanted storms; we wanted vistas. We wanted honey and musk; we wanted mouthfuls of cake. We wanted gushing bloody periods and thick eyebrows, wind chafing our faces. We wanted to rename the animals; we wanted to lead cults. We wanted to straddle the weak, to climb skyscrapers and hang statues of ourselves from their towers. We wanted our hymens broken, we wanted our

faces on coins. We wanted to lead invasions. We wanted to lie down naked in the middle of the street thrumming under the stampede of the new.

The wanting was so bright it nearly blinded us. We swore never to want again. This quickly grew problematic: wanting not to want. We wanted wantlessness so badly, we gave away all our things: our rings, our mirrors, our dog. The next day our mother left, which we told ourselves was what we wanted, which made us angry because we'd vowed not to want, and so we blamed ourselves. The truth was our mother had long threatened to leave, and her absence was marked less by its suddenness than by how little it changed the tone of the house, though the mood was perceptibly off. No one approached the stove. No one opened a window. The kitchen grew damp and fungal. The refrigerator whistled a high-pitched trill.

In our mother's wake: a windfall of nightmares—thumbs too big for doors, a discovery of wares—ointments and corsets, boomerangs, drapes, and retractable blades. We asked ourselves what a mother was. A mother was a tree in the middle of a house. A mother was a hole where missing went. A mother was never finished—half-baked cakes, unhemmed dresses, marked catalogs for stores that no longer existed.

We were debating the relationship between wanton and want when a woman appeared in our foyer. We didn't want her there, but we didn't want her gone. She appeared in the foyer and lent it an air of formality. We had once had a coat-tree, a shoe rack, and an umbrella stand in the foyer, but soon before she left, our mother had moved them to the stoop.

"Don't you want," our mother had called from the doorway to every man who passed. It wasn't clear if she was offering the furniture or admonishing their desire. One man hefted the coat-tree like a bride over his shoulder and carried it away. A second man snatched the shoe rack, hailed a cab, and sped off. A last man set his bag of groceries in the umbrella stand, tenderly lifted it to his chest, bowed to our mother, and ambled down the sidewalk.

We remembered all this when the woman arrived in a dripping coat and rain boots. Handshakes had never been encouraged in our family whether from fear of intimacy or germs we could not say, but we nodded at the woman. "Mmmm," she hummed inside her throat as she jotted something down on her clipboard page.

It was a cool day and the woman had a slight shiver. Although we thought of offering her something, none of us did. We'd fought our own wanting so studiously, we found ourselves unsure how to meet the unspoken needs of another. Plus, we had given up entertaining. Ever since our visit to the Wanting Beach, it seemed so much could be wanted and so much could be given that each possible guest was an undeniable argument for temptation and loss. As if with each stranger admitted over our threshold all the desires of all the people in the world might deluge our small apartment. And why wouldn't it be so? The world was overrun with wants.

Nevertheless, there was something affecting about the woman, so we stepped aside to admit her. She moved her eyes over the foyer, then stepped forward and took in the living room and adjacent dining area and peered a little to the left so she could peek into the narrow kitchen.

"Mmmm," came the throat murmur again. We suspected she was there to report upon our ability to care for ourselves. We were what they called "underage," though the term was questionable. After all, like the woman, we each were of an exact age, neither under nor over. Nevertheless, we had expected the arrival of someone for some time now. The woman with the clipboard, however, made no reference either to our youth or our motherlessness, the latter of which we would have denied—our mother having left no sign that she was not about to return at any moment: her slippers beside the bed, her wallet and keys on the counter, in the carpet little crescents of her nails.

"I could sell your apartment," the woman said.

"No thank you," we said.

"Does it have Wi-Fi?"

"It does."

"To appeal to you I could show you some properties my company has recently sold for very impressive sums."

There was something of a disappointment about her, made more disappointing by the shade of lipstick she wore on her lips and front teeth. Also, by the way she pulled in her chin as she spoke. She withdrew a business card from her purse. On the card was a photograph of a similar

woman in a similar coat, with lighter hair and the words: *Pivot toward buyers and thrive.*

"We see," we said, passing the card from one to the other. It was wholly unimpressive.

"I just got my license," the woman said. "I have to start somewhere."

"Not here," we said. But then we wondered if we were beginning to want something by not wanting it. Curiosity breeds intimacy. We blushed.

"Can you sing?"

"Can we what?"

"Do you sing together?"

"No," we said.

"You should. Group singing is easier than working out and cheaper than therapy. Singing fortifies and enriches."

Was this what they taught in real estate school? To sell something is better than to sell nothing? Could she sell us on singing? Make us the next girl group? Be our agent?

We had never before received a solicitation this professional, as we lived in a building with an off-putting facade. We were, however, accustomed by then to dodging the slew of advertisements aimed at our demographic claiming to have what we wanted. Our latest method was to focus instead on what we *needed*: twelve hundred calories and invisibility, which required neither wanting nor being wanted, respectively.

It was increasingly difficult to be girls and unwanted, but we worked at it. We bathed just enough not to give off an odor, but not enough as to be fragrant. We wore midcalf-length skirts with loose-fitting tops that didn't quite match. The idea was to be asexual and uncategorizable—neither hipster nor scene, yet not so puzzling as to encourage scrutiny. When we spoke, we favored verbs and nouns, and our voices were tuned slightly to the nasal. Whenever possible, we farted. We farted now.

"Mmmm," the woman hummed. It seemed to be a tic. We thought it was a clever tic for a woman to adopt, as it filled the silence and could be read into well: a sign of approval, contentment, sympathy, or agreement.

As for a woman with a clever tic in a dripping coat offering to represent us, that was something we didn't think we needed but also something we

didn't think we needed to do without either. Particularly now that she was here in our foyer and had given us her card. The question was, did girls need representation? If so, by whom? And were we entertaining the notion of the woman with the clipboard as our representative simply because she was the only candidate or because she was one possible older version of ourselves? Was this a problem? Might we be selling ourselves short? And what exactly did girls have that ought to be sold? One true fact: her coat was dripping on our floor.

"Would you like San Carlo Rodeos? They're Italian Fritos," we surprised ourselves by saying. There was a drawer in our kitchen filled with foreign versions of American snacks. We assumed they had been a collection of our late father.

"Maybe," the woman said.

"Hang your coat in the shower. Come back next week, and we'll give you the chips."

"I'll come back tomorrow."

Clearly the woman wanted something from us. We wondered if she'd been to the Wanting Beach. Could she be our heroine? Was her wanting acceptable or inexhaustible?

"Drying takes time," we said, "and we must find the snacks and empty them into a bowl."

The woman stood in her wet boots, said, "Mmmm," and jotted some more notes on her clipboard paper.

"The thing is," we said, "to exit the foyer."

We watched her cross to the bathroom, heard her pull the shower curtain aside, and saw her reemerge in a blue dress that was short enough to show her chapped knees. We were surprised she had chapped knees on such a damp day. It added to her lack of authenticity, and also caused a creeping desire to help her. Under the right circumstances, we might teach her what we'd discovered online about not wanting through meditation: *observe the want, neither condemning nor indulging it.* We wanted her to stay. No one was to blame. We guided her out the door.

The woman's appearance made us want our mother. *Hold the want in loving awareness.* Not the hollow mother who'd left us, but the mother she

might have been had she conquered the Wanting Beach, protected by her square teeth and her man's voice and her breath that smelled of licorice and bitters. *Notice how it feels in the body.* Our necks were stiff. Our shoulders rose when we inhaled. *See how it moves and changes.* We had few clues of our mother the way we wanted her, but there was a framed photograph in the hall: a young woman on a lawn with a book, where it seemed she once knew where she ended and others began. We could feel our hearts beat in our throats. When we'd remind her of our father, she'd walk away or sometimes grab us up and kiss us. *Softly repeat the name of the want the whole time it is present until it ends.* Leonard Cohen came to mind. We took up places around the baby grand piano, and expected the song would be there, either in the form of sheet music or memory, but we located neither. One of us hummed a first note. But we could not match it. The same happened when one of us hit a piano key—we were always flat.

It was a good thing. Not singing. Because, really, if we'd found a melody and sung it in one voice or three-part harmony, there'd have been no telling what could have happened. As it was, we sat down and looked up at the piano's soundboard from underneath. Surely we were not the only girls who would never sing. People were always losing abilities before they realized they had them, and it was nobody's fault. Least of all their own.

Instead of singing, we sat in a circle beneath the piano and invented a memory of our mother in her hair days. Before the Wanting Beach, teaching us to braid: one at a time, she called us into her room where she sat at her dressing table letting us practice on her hair, which was long and dark and smooth. Every hour until bed, we brought the scene to mind, and each time we altered it, adjusting the connections between our neurons, building the story into our synapses: on school days when we were rushing to make the bus, she'd whistle and we'd line up in the hall to braid one another's hair, with her at the rear. Our hair was finer than our mother's and shorter, but we imitated her touch down the line: fingers pointed and strong, like rain on the puddle of our scalps. Because she taught us each a different braid, we each went to school with a different hairstyle, depending upon the order in which we stood. … We manipulated, recalled, rewrote. Projected memories were amended into truth. French Braid, Fishtail, Halo.

“She was an exemplar,” we said.

“Our succor and our champion.”

“Not boys on a beach.”

“Not a woman with a clipboard.”

We were almost happy, then. We fell lightly into bed as if we were each a specific, answerable question.

The next morning we slept in. The sun made its way from window to window, and we did not feel the morning’s sharpness. Or we felt it, but passively, like the teeth in our mouths. We looked at one another from our pillows. We wiggled our toes. A mouse crossed the floor and stopped in our communal gaze. We flexed our feet, lifted and held on to them. Bringing our knees to our armpits, we rocked on our backs. Happy Baby.

When the woman appeared in the foyer again we were in the living room comparing the flexibility of our hamstrings. As a rule we did not compare ourselves to one another (compare and despair), but flexibility seemed an innocuous yet necessary trait to cultivate. People were always spraining, twisting, and breaking parts of themselves for lack of stretching. The super tore his ACL. The bus driver complained of back pain. The art teacher had tennis elbow. Only a pain-free body was a body one could deny.

“You’re here for the chips,” we said.

“Mmmm,” she said.

We made a show of having to search for the Italian chips. In fact, we had organized the snack drawer first thing when our mother disappeared. It was both comforting and disconcerting to realize just how long packaged foods remained edible.

“Disconcerting,” the woman said. “Mmmm.”

We had not been aware that we’d said the adjective aloud, which was itself disconcerting but also comforting. Perhaps someone understood us.

The woman was rounder than we’d remembered. And pinker. The wet coat then might be a sort of camouflage. There was so much for a woman to cover up.

“Do you ever not wear the coat?” we asked.

“The wanting coat?” We stopped our stretching. Did she say wanting or haunting?

“Bring it to us,” we said.

The woman crossed to the bathroom from where we heard a shake as of a bullfighter with his cape. She reemerged wearing her dry coat. We surrounded her, feeling for pockets, but there were none. We decided she must not have said wanting, but taunting.

“Here’s a list of common emotional triggers”—she handed us her clipboard—“needs people react to when they’re unmet. Which are yours?”

“None,” we said, stepping back, not looking at her list.

“Mine’s Acknowledgment, and Being Liked.”

“Actually,” we said, looking now, “Safety, and Being Right.”

“Mmmm.”

Uncomfortable silence ensued. We felt it in our chests.

We remembered the snacks and brought them out in a bowl decorated like a Holstein cow. Our parents had acquired a large selection of mismatched crockery from years of living communally in various ideological settings.

“Did I hear you sing earlier?”

“No,” we said.

“*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. / I do not think that they will sing to me.*”

“What are you after?” we asked, feeling an agitation in our legs.

“Same as you,” the woman said, “hunger without fear.” She was hunched over the corn snacks, smelling but not eating them. “In the meantime,” she lifted her head from the bowl, “I have more apartments to approach.”

That evening, we found the woman’s pen in the bathroom. It must have fallen when she’d played the torero. A gold-nibbed fountain pen with sandalwood barrel, it was not the type of pen we could keep without guilt. We thought we’d look into the real estate agency’s office. Ask for the woman. We prepared as best we could for any eventuality—practiced everything from rolling our *r*’s to roundhouse kicks. We surprised ourselves with the variety of our as-of-yet unused talents. In the morning, we drank green tea. Ate a handful of roasted pepitas. Sometimes our apartment offered up nutrition, other times only stinkbugs.

We walked single file through the open office door of Coastal Realtors. We pondered the name and found it wanting. Sometimes it was easier to find things outside of ourselves that wanted. Sharing a sense of deficiency with the entire known world made it less lonely to be away from home.

There were women at desks who looked up at our arrival, then back down again. Was it because we were youngish? Palish? Smelled of nothing? The woman from the business card was not there among the so-called Realtors. We found the term laughable as there'd been little that had felt real about the woman who'd visited us, particularly now that she was not to be found in her purported place of business.

"May I help you?" one of the women finally said. We tried to imagine ourselves as grown women, not wanting to help but pretending to. We would be smarter than these women; we would not be in blouses behind desks. But who would we be? And where were the women who demonstrated anything at all that did not look like a euphemism for *woman*? A phone rang; a chair squeaked; outside, a truck backed up and the shop filled with its warning beeps. We spun in our sneakers and left.

As soon as we'd exited the agency, we spotted her, about a block away, her back to us, standing at a bus stop in the coat. We hurried toward her.

"You left this," we said, holding out the pen.

The woman turned around. She looked grateful and reached out to take the pen, but it was not her. Embarrassed, we pocketed the pen and, pretending we'd just heard our names called, we ran. Across the street and down the block.

And because our legs were already running, and running felt like what our legs were meant for, we ran on. We watched ourselves flash by in store windows. Saw it clearly: the want in our eyes, pointless and burning. Greedy as curiosity. We told ourselves we were young and that was to be expected. Wants might arrive, but we did not have to serve them. We picked up speed. We ran past children climbing fences. We reminded ourselves, want would always be dangerous. Would bring us to the attention of the authorities. We ran past men at tables strumming their thighs. We tried to reason with ourselves: treat want as pilot light—flame enough to get up in the morning but not enough to combust. By the time our mother left, she

was burning blue. We bit the insides of our cheeks. We sprinted faster down the road, past beggars in hats, past preachers with flyers.

We felt our want building, channeling, filling us. Not leaking through our eyes like our mother's but concentrated, unadulterated in our girl bodies, until we became magnets with vector fields, pointed and irresistible. Want as weapon, want as shield; attracting all that was deprived, repelling all that was obliged. Things began to stick to us; things began to fall away. Our sight grew keen and panoramic; we could see ahead to the shore and the ocean beyond and also behind to the line of people some distance back and following. Our clothes grew heavy and peeled off of us as we slowed to a walk, breathing deeply. We passed our house and continued to the end of the road. New words formed on our lips. Seeds sprouted from our footprints. Our fists filled with coins; we were suddenly aware of the muscles in our arms; the day turned a new color.

Then in the torque of the new magnetic field, something powerful took hold of us. A want so strong we were temporarily paralyzed. We shared a look that said we all wanted the same thing, and we all wished one of us would do what we all wanted, but none of us wanted to do it. We were afraid. Then something pushed us—a gust of wind or a feather, and we headed forward to the Wanting Beach.

A hot breeze lifted off the sand, and in the magnetic moment we suddenly recalled the list of needs that could be unmet. Recalling them gave them presence in the afternoon heat. Needs and wants began to confuse themselves, and the air felt tangled and thick. Slowly, we squatted. Tapping into our downward flowing energy, we passed the pen from one to the other and cut our names into the beach. One by one we engraved them. Then, feet together, knees apart, pelvis on heels, we leaned forward and lowered our heads. At first our arms hung like garlands around us. Then slowly we swung them forward and back, digging wings into the sand. The surf filled our molds with foam, and we had never felt so ready. The sand was dark and wet. The sky was low.

Reflections on the Real Joe Dicostanzo

Samuel R. Delany

—For Leiza Brown

Joe Dicostanzo was a young Italian American, whom, in 1968, I picked up one August night and brought back to my ground-floor rear apartment at 642 East Sixth Street. He was twenty-six years old, as was I. We had a two-/three-week affair. Like me, Joe had been married (at something like seventeen—and divorced at nineteen). I believe he and his wife had a child, a daughter whom his mother was raising, down in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where she lived—and where Joe had grown up.

It was a hot August night in 1968 in New York City.

Who were we?

We were young men who had grown up listening to Orson Welles declare weekly on the radio, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows … The weed of crime bears bitter fruit. Crime does not pay … The Shadow knows!" Whatever confusions we got ourselves entailed with, probably we believed it.

After a day spent writing and a nap of a few hours, I rose at eleven, twelve, or one and wandered across Eighth Street and down to Christopher and Sheridan Square, to make my way to the overhead highway and the trucks parked beneath it, edging the city's west strip, with its dilapidated docks and warehouses (nothing remains of that now: it has all been converted into ground-level highway and park). That night the cruising activity among the trucks was high. And I found myself at the back of an open van parked deep among the others, in which a number of guys were getting in and out a little more frequently than any of the others in sight, which suggested that the activity inside was particularly vigorous.

While a couple of guys in jeans and T-shirts were leaving, I climbed in. It was pitch-black (a night within a night …)—but soon I had figured out that there were between ten and fifteen men in there, all involved with one another. Soon I had been absorbed in their number.

Memory tells me at this point that, whatever (or whomever) it was I was specifically doing, somewhere to my right I heard someone whisper, "… Oh, my God!" more in awe than fright. A minute later, someone else whispered something like, "What am I supposed to *do* with this thing, anyway …?" and somebody else (quite probably Joe) chuckled. In the course of moving among those bodies, we connected—and I realized the source of the whispered comments. But what remains far more clearly, however, is the nature of Joe's movements. In such a situation (without light and among complete strangers), most people move hesitantly, tentatively, wary both of hurting and of being hurt; that is, very inured to rejection. Perhaps because he'd learned—yes, because of his size—few people were going to reject *him*, however, even in that dark orgiastic knot, Joe moved with a certainty apprehensible from the first time we touched. I liked it, and immediately tried to do the same—and, indeed, because I wasn't often rejected either, at that time, I probably succeeded. It was not the quick surety of movement that I—and many other men in such a situation—had learned to associate with pickpockets. (And there *were* pickpockets, now and again availing themselves of the darkness and desire in the backs of the trucks. I was fortunate never to be victimized by one—I never took any money with me when I went there. Others, sadly, had.) This was leisurely and firm, however, and thus clearly something else. Soon, on the strength of it, Joe and I had pretty much made ourselves a couple in the midst of the orgy. Indeed, neither of us *was* rejecting other people. But over the next fifteen or twenty minutes, it was also clear that, among the complexities and intertwinings, we were enjoying each other far more than we were the rest. At this point I think it was Joe who whispered into my ear (but, of course, it may have been me who whispered to him): "Hey, you want to get out of here?"

Whoever answered, that answer was: "Yeah. Sure—come on."

So, holding hands, we pulled loose from the others and made our way to the mouth of the van and climbed down—faces clearing for the first time as we did so—onto the asphalt. And I was now able to see the friendly, curious, good-looking young man who was, himself, trying to see who exactly he had picked up for the night.

By the time we were standing down on the cracked, rubbly paving, clearly we were both satisfied with our choice.

He was a surprisingly good-looking Italian kid with medium-length black hair. He had no place to go, but I had my own apartment. It was a bit of a walk, I told him, on the Lower East Side all the way across the island to Alphabet City—between Avenues C and D, in a ground-floor apartment at the back of a hall in number 642. On a mattress in the room off the kitchen that served as my bedroom, I learned what really turned him on was lying on his back while I sat on his face, and he tongued my butt and jerked off till he came; then I sucked him. I only got my jeans off one leg, and he just managed to get his opened. Later, the tale came out.

He'd moved up from Fort Lauderdale in Florida, where he'd lived with his mother. He'd been brought to New York by someone I first assumed was an older man named Max, who owned a house on the western edge of New York City, about two blocks south of where my agent had recently moved with his office, but Joe felt uncomfortable bringing people he'd just met over there. Max was letting him stay in the house but would come over regularly once or twice a week, and Joe would put the fellow on a dog leash and walk him around the rooms in the house. For this, he was allowed to stay there and receive minimal pay, out of which he fed himself. If there was actual sex between them, I was unclear. In that relationship, Joe was the top, whereas with me, clearly he wanted to be the bottom, and I was happy to comply. He was amazingly well-hung. (We're talking an uncircumcised king-sized Budweiser can!)

We spent the night together at my place and had sex several times. While we were lying on the mattress in the back room, he treated me to a disquisition on the unreality of Max's life—Max had never been married, the way Joe had been; he never had to scrabble for his living the way Joe had; he didn't do drugs, and he owned the building where Joe was staying,

but lived somewhere else in the city, as well as had his own place in Florida. (I had been married, yes, but I wasn't particularly into drugs at all myself.) Later, it occurred to me, if only because he existed, Max was just as real as I was—though who was the creator in terms of the relationship was possibly a big unknown. In Florida they had known each other for several years before something had happened that had caused Max to invite Joe to come up to the city. Joe had had a job doing grounds work at some sort of racetrack, I think it was, down in Florida, which is how the two of them had first known each other, casually for a couple of years. …

While we talked, Joe told me about Florida friends who were then in jail, of his two years working at a Florida stock-car track, not as a mechanic—though that was the job he'd have liked, and despite the business arrangement for the summer, I know he didn't consider himself a hustler. "Naw, this is a guy I've been friends with for years—since I was a kid, almost. I guess he always wanted to do something with me, but before this summer, we just never did. Then the chance to go with him to New York came up, and watch his house for him; so he asked me if I minded doing a little work for it. Yeah, it's an S&M thing. But I've done that before, just for fun. Basically I just take him on walks around the place. I throw a stick and make him play fetch with me. When he does something wrong, I tell him he's a bad, bad doggy … stuff like that. We fool around a little … well, not that much. The first night I was up here, he took me out to dinner. It was real nice. But he's very busy. It's funny—I used to see more of him down in Florida than I do up here, when we weren't doin' nothin' at all." At this distance, of course, I could be off in any—and, indeed, every—detail. But that's the effect they produced as, now and again, he'd mention one or another aspect of the relationship.

In the morning, when I was walking Joe back west, I ran into Susan Schweers on the street, a member of the recently disbanded commune and band that I'd been part of, Heavenly Breakfast; in the book about it (also titled *Heavenly Breakfast*), she is called Lee. After I introduced her to a friendly Joe, the next time she saw me, she said, "Hey, Chip, I *want* one of those. Where did you find him?"

So probably I told her, or I might have said, "Just somebody I met."

Meet a new person and you enter a new city because you go to new places by new routes at new times.

A day or so later, I remember, Joe came and knocked on my door. He had a bicycle that belonged to a girlfriend of his, who lived in Brooklyn Heights. Her name was something like Jen. We took some time to screw around as before, and the next I knew, it was three or four in the afternoon, and Joe and I were walking his bicycle up the steps to the walkway of the Williamsburg Bridge.

It was one of those gray and copper evenings where fragments of a brilliant sunset try to break briefly through the city's overhang of industrial haze, before night wells up from the steely water and engulfs all but the window and park lights along both shores.

It was four or five o'clock in the afternoon before we approached the Brooklyn end, when a bunch of black kids, none older than fourteen, stopped us—there were perhaps eight of them. To my astonishment, one pulled a (very ordinary pocket) knife out of his jeans and, rather matter-of-factly (you would have thought they were asking us for a stick of gum), told us to give them all our money.

I didn't have any money in my pocket. "Sorry," I said. "Better luck next time." But as I recall, Joe had two dollars. He took them out, held them up, then wholly surprised me by starting off, "I don't think you really want to do this. Lemme tell you why …" and, equally discursively, he began to recount—with far more self-confidence than I could have mustered—the downside of a life of crime and petty pilferings.

The boys listened attentively, like schoolchildren hearing out a social studies teacher. There were benches for pedestrians on both ends of the bridge walkway back then, and after ten minutes, we all ended up sitting on them—two of the kids cross-legged on the concrete at our feet—while Joe went on dissuading our young muggers from robbing us. Eventually, I kid you not, one of them said it was late and he had to get home. The leader argued half-heartedly that he should be allowed to take Joe's two dollars with him since, after all, he had a knife—and we were supposed to be scared he was going to use it.

“Oh, come on,” Joe said. “You can’t do any damage with *that* thing. Look how much bigger we are than you. We’d fight back, and, yeah, maybe you or even we might get cut—but all you’d do would be to make a mess. You’d get all this blood all over you, on your jacket there, your shirt. *Yuccht!* That’s not what you *really* want to do. You wanna forget all this, go home, and be glad the police aren’t running around banging on your mom’s door lookin’ for you! ’Cause that’s what they do—and they bang *hard*! With billy clubs! You’re eatin’ dinner, they come banging, and scare you out of your seat!” One of the other kids, who I think was pretty nervous about the whole thing, started to argue with the leader—on Joe’s side now. Finally, with Joe’s two bucks back in his own jeans pocket, they allowed us to leave—and they went on into Williamsburg.

Today my sense is that Joe had done a fair amount of this himself—stealing cars for joyrides, shoplifting, and the sorts of petty crimes adolescents can so easily fall into in that overgrown Florida landscape … about which, of course, at the time I knew little. But I suspect the police had come banging on *his* mother’s door (why do I think they lived in a trailer park …?) more than once, before he was twenty. He sounded like he knew what he was talking about.

The first thing I asked Joe was: “You weren’t scared?”

“Naw,” Joe said. “Maybe a little bit, at the beginning. But when they went and sat down with us, I knew I had ’em.”[1]

I confess, once it had begun to swing in our favor, I had gotten into it with the kids too and probably added as much to the tales of inconvenience, difficulty, and unhappiness that awaited them all as Joe did. But I certainly hadn’t begun with his confidence—two gay young men, one white, one black, set upon by a band of young muggers. Nor would it ever have occurred to me to try and argue my way out of it if he hadn’t begun it.[2] Also, at a level that had not been the case before, I was curious about Joe and who he was and who he had been before I had encountered him in the trucks.

I recalled the Cheshire Cat from Alice, and Miss Liddell’s own comment, “Curiouser and curiouser,” as she’d made her way through the wonderland of her own imaginings (was it sitting up among the girders of the bridge,

looking down, the way it had sat among the branches?), not all that different from the ones that I was constructing around Joe.

The next day, walking together through the streets of the Lower East Side, we ran into Sue Schweers, and when she asked him, "And what do you do?," Joe smiled winningly and said, "I'm house-sitting for a friend of mine, over in the west twenties."

This simple social reduction and all it conveniently elided probably marked the point where my own imagination began to take in the possibilities that, indeed, Joe was the dark phallic prince of the revels, whose secret task was nightly to drag gangs of men back from the trucks, to bring the most debauched leathermen from the West Side gay bars, for games and glories involving slings, ropes, racks, chains, whips, and manacles, while candles guttered redly in the windows till dawn and in which—yes—his elderly patron was chained and slung at the center; parties that, in only hours or days, after I had proved myself, sexually and drugwise, I would finally be asked to join.

Yes, it was only, now and again, a momentary fantasy. For the facts were, when, from time to time, we went back there, among those bare beige and white walls, no such equipment was ever in evidence. (Though, of course, neither was the dog leash.) But, by now, I'd also picked up on the fact that Joe was not particularly anxious to take *anyone* back to his house. At least *part* of his summer job was to look out for it—and that's what he was doing.

We talked with Sue a few more minutes. I think Joe asked Sue some tentative questions about the acquisition of various drugs, for which she gave helpful—though far more evasive than she could have (I knew)—answers. Then we walked on.

On Avenue B or C, perhaps a week later, again I ran into Sue, this time by myself.

"My God, Chip—he's *gorgeous*!" she volunteered. "Of course he's as thick as a brick. But who *cares*! … Where in the world did you *find* him? Really—do you think you could get me two or three? Just for the weekend, I mean. I could rub them together like Boy Scouts … and start a fire!"

I was pleased, but it was also the death of any lingering fantasies of satanic revelry over in that empty West Side space. For those who had not plucked Joe out of the night and held him to them while he labored on into the dawn for their pleasure, Joe was pretty obviously exactly what he was: an extremely good-looking Italian druggie, up from the South.

Joe had a little girlfriend, Jennifer (another black-haired Italian American, incidentally, about twenty-two or twenty-three years old), whom he'd made on his own while here; maybe it had started as a conversation between them in Sheridan Square, or perhaps she lived with another friend who, in a spate of boredom, Joe'd once decided to look up, and (having had much the same response to him as Sue) she had, in return, come searching him out in his empty town house. Currently Jen was a source of endless drugs for them both and for, I guess, anyone else who happened to be around. With Joe I first tried both cocaine and LSD proper—though, along with me, Jennifer too was allowed to visit at Twentieth Street. I think I saw her a couple of times in the bare rooms of Joe's three stories and a couple of times when Joe and I visited her at the grungy apartment where she was staying, somewhere nearer mine on the East Side. When I first met her, her hair was blonde with an inch of black root; when I saw her again she had dyed it back to its "natural" black. She spent a lot of time asking Joe what he thought of it. And he assured her it really looked "great, just great." Certainly, her fingers heavy with silver rings, Jen was the first person I ever saw dump a wax-paper envelope of cocaine onto a mirror and make lines in it with a razor blade. If you met Joey and Jennifer together twice (she always called him "Joey"), it was clear she was passionately in love with him—whereas he found her fun and amusing (and he liked her drugs), but by no means was she the center of his life. I recall when I was with them I felt not a jot of jealousy, because Joe was obviously so much more into me than he was into her—if anything, I felt a bit uncomfortable on *her* behalf, since it was so clear she had a hopeless crush on a man, who, despite his previous marriage, was gay. He told me she reminded him of *his* wife, only Jen was a "little crazier."

My first acid trip was with Joe, on Jennifer's acid, Jennifer herself having been dismissed for the night: "Come on, Jen. Go on home now. This is

Chip's first time, and I wanna be with him for it"—and so, sulkily, Jennifer took another hit of coke, then left—when, after having watched the sunset together from the roof of Joe's building, much later that night the two of us were walking along the West Side waterfront when we passed a big stone building with glass doors. Without speaking, we turned quietly into them and stepped into a dim lobby, where some guards sat at a desk alone in that vast space of polished gray-green stone. We walked across the echoing tile. Then one or the other of us asked, "What *is* this place … ?" to be told, in sepulchral tones by the uniformed man at the desk, "This is the New York Drug Administrations Building."

Speechless (and for brief minutes hopelessly paranoid), we turned away, back across that endless floor, and walked out the glass doors again—once more into the night, where, after walking away quietly for ten, fifteen, twenty seconds, we broke up, laughing hysterically. I have always wondered *how* in the world we chose *that* building out of all possible places to enter at 11:30 p.m.!

Toward the end of our weeks together, I took off for seven days, which included the weekend after the Labor Day weekend, to go to the Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference in Milford, Pennsylvania. At the end of the conference, filmmaker Ed Emshwiller (who showed a film called *Relativity* and was working on one called *Image, Flesh, and Voice*) and his wife, writer Carol Emshwiller, drove me back up from the little Pennsylvania town to New York City on a very hot September afternoon, to let me off at Twentieth Street and Eighth Avenue. I told them I was going to see my agent, Henry—but once I got out and they drove on, I walked past his little inset door and continued the two blocks west with my duffel bag to Joe's. I rang the bell. Someone buzzed me in. I went upstairs. In one of the bare rooms, Joe was on a ladder, with a toothbrush, scrubbing the molding around the ceiling. (The house was all but unfurnished. Somehow I had assumed that it had been filled with expensive artwork just from a few things Joe had said in passing about Max, but now I began to wonder if, besides not living in the place, Max wasn't somehow much younger than I had thought, even if he was months or even a year or two older than Joe.) Innocently, I asked, "What are you doing?"

And Joe burst out weeping, practically fell down the ladder, and collapsed into my arms, sobbing—to explain that he'd been getting ready to kill himself. Only he'd decided he'd better clean the house up first before he did it so that he didn't create a mess for his friend….

I thought about asking where Max was, then realized I knew so little about him and the nature of their relation that it became awkward….

The suicide incident made me realize Joe was more troubled than I was ready to deal with. I came to see him twice over the next two days: he'd decided to return home to his mother's. Besides, Max had finally rented out the house to somebody else, who wanted to move in some furniture. I don't know how much the bizarre services Joe had to perform in place of rent were behind the "suicide" attempt. Back then I would have thought they had a great deal to do with it. Today, I suspect that the regularity of his duties and their general lack of demands on him were, if anything, stabilizing forces in his otherwise wholly unstructured life, over what must have been a far odder summer for him than it was for me. But it could also have been too many nights at the trucks, coupled with much too much of Jennifer's acid, speed, and coke. So I took his mom's address and phone number, and relatively comfortably we parted—I spoke to him on the phone the day he left.

Really, Joe wanted someone who was more into drugs, finally, than into sex—and that *wasn't* me. (If there was something I'm really curious about today, it's where Joe ended up on the Kinsey scale: I didn't separate from my wife until 1980, and we divorced in '82. From '91 on, I've lived pretty happily with a male partner and spent forty years as a tenured college professor, critic, and novelist.) Joe went back to Florida in mid or late September. Fairly soon, I started a story in which someone named Joe Dicostanzo was split into two characters. I called the other one Max—and even while I was writing it, I realized that I had no real notion of who the real Max was. (*Had* his name been Max after all, or was that something I had added on my own in the course of the writing?) So I began to turn him into some kind of projection of myself, as the building, in which they both lived in the story, became stranger and stranger.

Not too long afterward, Anne McCaffrey (who lived out in Glen Cove, Long Island, not far from where Sue Schweers's mother lived, and had a beautifully operatically trained voice) asked me for a story for a book she was doing called *Alchemy and Academe*. I spent at least one evening, sitting on her porch, talking about the story and listening to her sing. Annie's birthday was the same day—April first—as mine. Either when the story was finished or when it was sold, I sent a manuscript copy to Joe's Fort Lauderdale address.

I still had it written in my notebook.

I never got an answer.

Eventually I phoned—and spoke to him. Yes, he'd read the story. It hadn't made a lot of sense, though, he explained. "Who was Max supposed to be?" he wanted to know.

"Just a … name," I said. "Maybe your friend, maybe me—or part of you."

"His name wasn't Max," Joe told me, with a slightly curious tone. By this time, I'd really believed that it was, which is why I've written it this way, but maybe it was something like "Matt" or one he hadn't even told me.

His mother had thought it was nice that he had a story with his name in it, though she hadn't read it. My own mother claimed to be wholly unable to read my work or understand it, though she always bought one or two copies from a bookstore.

Joe also told me he was teaching school in some alternative teaching program, to seven-, eight-, and nine-year-olds. Given his response to those kids on the bridge, probably he was good at it.

—February 2002/August 2018
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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[1] The invading child in the October 1968 version of the tale, "Night and the Loves of Joe Dicostanzo," is "the little bit" that Joe *was* scared of. Or maybe it was the much greater bit of my own fear/fascination at the entire incident.

[2] Were I writing the story today, definitely I would have made the invading boy black—but at the time, that seemed falling too much into racial stereotypes of the exotic. So I made him the redheaded nemesis now there in the text—who surely has *his* visual origins in the representation of Kid Death,

from my 1966 novel, *The Einstein Intersection*. But, in terms of the event, it comes from that gang of seven/eight kids looking for someone to mug (and failing spectacularly) out on the bridge walkway that August evening.

The Unsent Letters of Blaise and Jacqueline Pascal

Kelsey Peterson

BLAISE PASCAL WAS A FRENCH MATHEMATICIAN and Christian apologist born in 1623. He was very close with his younger sister, Jacqueline, born in 1625, a poet who became a nun. Both were considered prodigies.

Brother,
I saw a perfect circle today. The yellow disk at the center of an anemone bloomed early and whose white petals had curled back in the wind. I marveled at its humble perfection, springing forth from some superabundance of the unrelenting spring. I am curious if there is an equation for such a flower, the formula to project its arcs and angles, its radii and planes. But I think: what an excessive, joyful thing. Let us smell it and give glory to God.

> Jacqueline,
> Printed in the Gazette today there was a poem of some merit, and I wondered if you still write. To harness the imagination to your whimsy—it's a dangerous, even dangerously useless gift, but you ~~had~~ have it.

Port-Royal has seen a premature yield of flowers and herbs, some eager but underdeveloped fruit. I have been apprenticing in our little school, but Mère Angelique wants me acquainted with all of our

abbey's operations, especially before I take my vows.

> I don't doubt that Mère Agnes has dissuaded you from practicing it. Instead, you must be mending socks. The clink clink of your needles.

M. D'Andilly is a master gardener. He's cultivated rows of espaliered pear trees, their branches tamed to grow flat and straight as boulevards. As he trains the young trees, tying their soft bendable limbs against the trellis, he pulls and lashes them quite firmly.

> I'm writing because it's been six months since you left, and I thought—

I am far gentler, afraid they will break, but he knows the stuff of which they're made. It's this intimacy, more than any of his knowledge, that tells me he's a master gardener.

> Dear Jacqueline,
> I wait for your letters, in the pattern they once arrived. I wonder how often you must pray to God.

From my room, I can sometimes smell the garden, if the wind is strong enough.

> As you rise, your voice still hoarse, your face puffy.

In those moments, my happiness is greater than my own two arms spread wide.

> Noon, your mind cast ahead to the thoughts of the day, back to what was left undone. At dusk, languor setting in.

Then I think: brother.

I am curious.

Are you still trying to measure the air?

Do you ask him questions?

Are you still perfecting your triangle of chance?

Does he answer you?

Do you believe God can be found out?

I don't doubt that you believe he does.

Blaise, my brother,
I began to write you a letter, but I lost it. You might wonder how, with so few possessions to my name, I could lose something. The truth is I carried it with me into the swamp.

Were we to speak as we once did, I would tell you about magic numbers.

8	1	6
3	5	7
4	9	2

Sometimes I can feel what you describe as the atmosphere in the swamp. I can feel how it is different from in town. It's as though the air is holding in water, bloated, sleepily weighed down, slumping against the earth.

> In this array of numbers, every integer in every direction adds up to the same number. This number is called the magic constant. The magic constant here, if you haven't figured it out yet, is fifteen.

Somehow, I lost your letter in the swamp.

> This arithmetic originates with the Chinese, who believed magic squares mirror some essential balance in the universe. They are inherently satisfying to produce, as if you've discovered some mystery that is, while invisible in the world, the very stuff that undergirds it.

I began to write again, a little ditty. I know you despise Poetry, but you don't despise *my* poetry. When I see the words on the page and hear in my mind the well-ordered, lilting lines of verse, I feel a small dose of the pleasure I'm sure God felt when he fashioned us out of dust and saw that we were good.

> But I could not speak with you about this now.

I remember when I appeared before the queen and the princess. I was so young then. You were banging against our pots and pans and scribbling your thoughts on acoustics. Meanwhile, I had my own thoughts on acoustics: the flow and cadence of words confined to lines, bursting from lines, refracting each other's sounds as water does light.

> You would condemn me.

I remember improvising verse for her highness, an exercise like embroidering in my head, a more

satisfying reward in itself than the treats they gave us to follow, the tart lemonade and the shining cherries.

> Dear Sister,
> You won't believe it, but I sold another one of my machines—the "Pascaline"! I know you found it, I believe your words were, "as cumbersome as a cow in labor," but I believe the gentleman, a tax collector in Paris, will find it perfectly functional.

Brother,
I am so hateful. I am—I hate myself. I write a poem and I am smitten, as though I were the one who held the waters in a span and with a look tamed the Leviathan. And then! I return again to the pen. Like a dog to its vomit.

> There are times when, as I draw close to numbers, as I learn to fine-tune and predict them, I find there is no knowing them. Numbers are immortal. They sprawl.

Living water will never issue from my pen. All I set down will be dried up. And while I am agog in my poesy, I am oblivious to the one who makes the sun to shine and gives the flowers growth.

> I come close, as one comes close to a person, only to realize, on the physical level, I will never consider each hair and freckle on their body, and within those tissues and follicles, blood rushes and humors balance, and within those, atoms break into tinier iotas;

But most hateful—I must let go this hate—is that I left.

and then, on the spiritual level, there are
thoughts and subthoughts I will never know;
even the memories and ways of thinking that
create those thoughts; even the structures of the
mind and the hidden waxings of the soul that
produce those impressions …

I left without saying goodbye. In the morning, as
though for a walk, before you had woken.

And so, accepting that I will never know a
person—let alone distance, abandonment,
death—I turn to the world of numbers, thinking
I can surely know them; they are still, steadfast,
immutable;

I made my promise to Father that I would stay until
he passed. And so I did. And then, beyond that, I
remained with you, for your good. But I am not the
means to your well-being, although you may—I know
you can—think so.

but they prove just as eternally, minutely
recursive, and forever, frustratingly teeming.

What is my love unto God if my hands and feet, my
body and soul, are unto you—

I think: what am I to do.

soaking cloths in brandy for your constant, constant
ailments, spooning food into your mouth,

I think: I have made this machine. I have
tinkered and prodded, set levers just so, produced
an object that without me will produce.

and once you're well, sweeping the hall while you disappear to salons, returning to regale me with visions of turkey rugs, stacked porcelain chips, silver tureens lifted to reveal steaming pheasants.

> Surely, others will create machines more complex, capable of dividing and then some, perhaps even grasping the whole world of numbers.

There are two loves, Blaise.

> But will a machine be in awe of that world?

One for God, one for self.

> Will a machine delight in such emergent, barely perceptible knowledge, the way the sun appears as a mirage of golden gel on the water before it rises?

Mère Agnes told me I must hate my genius.

> They will never know what it is to know something new. To be made new by knowing something.

I showed her my latest ditty. And I think,

> Our God is hidden. He rewards those who seek him.

I do hate my genius—my needy, clamoring genius.
But I love ~~him~~ it too.

> Sister,

Brother,

> I don't understand the opposition to the existence of a vacuum. My experiments, especially with Florin's help on the Puy de, Dôme, provide incontrovertible evidence that they exist. One would think people would sooner deny their ability to see—see the silver mercury dip in the long glass tubes as they were carried, precariously, tilting, up the mountainside—than they would revise their prior way of thinking.

Christ showed himself to children. I learn more about him through crude acts of daily routine than I do reading the volumes M. Arnauld copies from Latin. Our Lord was a carpenter, not a scholar. His hands knew the grain, knew splinters; they were not soft.

> Come. Let us say God could not create a vacuum. Let us say God could not even sustain a vacuum, for how can he be everywhere when not everywhere allows him to be?

I lift myself from sleep, I fill my bowl with pottage.

> Now. In the beginning, we are told, God created the heavens and the earth ex nihilo.

I adjust my veil, I wipe sweat from my chin.

> What were his materials? Nothing. What was his model? Nothing. What have we to fear when he tells us to fear nothing?

I quench my thirst with beer.

I fear not lack of certainty—for who in this life
has certainty?—

I sprinkle my parchment with pounce.

I fear God has forsaken me,

I grind thistle leaves to powder.

as you have.

I suck my thumb from jamming it in the door.

I fear all I have accomplished is a vapor.

I throw my shovel in the wet earth. I hold a girl's foot by the heel, I wipe away the pus from an open sore.

I wish you would not think of me as a vapor. As something that should not be held.

I dry my socks on the back of a chair. I wake in the night from a dream, and I cannot feel my arm.

If you can, think of me not as your brother. Think of me not as the diseased, as the gambling, as the genius.

I find in my hair a dead spider.

Think of me as a student you teach. Think of me as knowing nothing, yet knowing everything. Think of me as innocent, yet guilty. Think of me as before my time, yet hurtling toward it.

I give, to a girl, a pair of socks. I lick from my lips the sweet wine from the cup.

Think of me growing old, then growing young. Think of me gaining strength, then losing it. Think of me groping toward knowledge, yet knowledge evading me. Think of me hating, yet loving. Think of me hating myself, yet loving myself. Think of me hating the world, yet loving the world.

I see my reflection in the still water of the bog. I squeeze my eyes against a headache.

Think of me dying, yet living.

Lord, run to me.

There are two loves, Jacqueline.

That is my prayer.

One for God, one neighbor.

Lord, run.

Think of me as your neighbor.

I will take my vows.

Dear Jacqueline,

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

I will stake my life on it.

Untitled or Not Yet

Sarah Blackman

Twyla is looking at a sculpture. Conceptual. Underwhelming. She is waiting for it to work on her, this thing made of weights suspended in net bags at varying heights from a nail in the gallery wall. A heating-vent breeze spins the mobiles that hang from the ceiling, but the sculpture is not stirred. Twyla herself is not stirred. Around her the gala ebbs and flows. People are so excited—their shoes are so exciting, their clothes, their hair, their snacks! —that they might conceivably begin to run back and forth across the room in a noisy, excited flock as they used to do in the long-ago days of school dances beneath the DJ's gibbous moon. She has been standing here too long, so out of the night's current, she is no longer even eddied around. The evening is progressing apace without her in it. She is stuck.

But still: the nets. The still nets and their weights that are metal, she reads on the tag, but they look like blond, rounded stones of the sort one might find along the edge of a geologically significant lake. Twyla imagines herself a geologist. She envisions the Wellingtons, the pants with many pockets, the waterproof hat. The lake is a typical significant lake: becalmed, majestic. To get there she would have had to leave her car by the side of a logging road and hike; she would have had to commune in silence with her breath for a long, unpunctuated time. She pictures herself picking up those geologically significant rocks and slipping them into collection nets, hanging the collection nets all about her person until, rocks banging her knees, she finally wades out into the lake itself. Her curiosity is fed by knowledge—she is, after all, an expert—and yet there remains the child inside who insists each stone flipped by the tip of clumsy Wellington might reveal, impressed by an epoch of geological conspiracy, the ghostly evidence of … alien intervention? … sci-fi society inside earth's hollow core? … thumbprint of almighty God? … Could be anything is the point.

Anything at all just a little farther out into the water. And then what? Twisting an ankle? Slipping down the slithery edge of an underwater precipice into the dark, still, cold … the water so cold it was more like a gas … outer-space water … star water … into the heart of the lake where all those significant rocks would drag her down into cold, dark, still … What would look back at her? What would blink its eyes?

Twyla shudders. That is a nightmare. She is having a nightmare right here in the gallery with a glass of wine in her hand and wine shrinking on her lips like a kind of purple lipstick that is one size too small for her face. Anther is at her elbow as usual and feels her quake. "What is it?" he says, scanning the crowd with an arch to his eyebrows as if he is looking over the top of a pair of spectacles. What are those called? The ones with a handle that a person can hold over their face like a mask? Anther can make his face look like it is looking through almost anything. A camera. A partially raised window. A poked-out knot in a pinewood fence. It is a gift, that face. Tonight he has trimmed his mustache so tightly it seems likely he has drawn it on. It makes him look like Salvador Dalí, but younger and pinker and blonder and plumper. Souther. Salvador Dalí as a southern queer. In seersucker pants. With a pimple behind his ear.

Everyone is here. All the old art weirdos, all the bankers. All the young art weirdos, each weirder than the next, and their nervous dates. They are fund-raising—a new wing on the art museum to be used as a local hero's reliquary, starting with the collection of the very same local hero, recently deceased, who had designed the chicken-foot mobiles above Twyla and Anther's heads and painted both the monumental and the teeny-tiny canvases that line the walls. Each painting is of the same person, though none can be called portraiture. *Her daughter*, someone says. *Cancer*, says someone else and shakes his head. *Oh*, *she was a pistol*, says a third, who is drunk and shoots off her fingers from her hips like pow pow pow. She is aiming for the kneecaps, Twyla notices. Aiming to maim. Everyone ignores the auctioneer, who is getting desperate and offering a hot-air balloon ride over the city *with* four new Michelin tires for the low price of $1,000 smackeroos.

“Smackeroos,” the auctioneer says. “I mean, I’m telling you people. This is a steal.”

“Lorgnette,” says Twyla.

No.

“But they’re not even real stones,” says Twyla.

No.

No one here is rich. Not really rich. Not rich enough. Some of the women wear fur coats. Some of them carry cranky handbags shifting all over with jet beads. The trappings of richery, which meant, in Twyla’s pretty well extensive experience both in real life and through her appreciation of celebrity culture, not rich. The rich dress like hoboes. The ends of their sleeves fray; there are holes in their shoes. The rich do not give even one little fuck about Michelin tires, though they might go in for hot-air balloon rides. Nothing is going to happen here. The chicken feet will not descend. She is wasting her time.

It is the pills that make her so mean. They make her lips pucker with meanness, which Anther knows as he knows almost everything about her starting from the eighth grade when they had become friends smoking in the woods behind the school—forbidding forest of cigarette butts, used condoms, Mountain Dew cans, shotgun shells—and continuing through some truly rough but also stereotypical times. His father kicked him out. Her first boyfriend gave her herpes. He had an affair with the high-school track coach. Her mother died. Through it all, he kept climbing through her window at night as if they were in a television show. She woke up in the morning to find him in her bed, snuffling into the pillow like a big, heedless, entitled dog. Or woke up in the morning and he would already be gone, but have left her something on the windowsill. A little pyramid of pills: chalky white ones, translucent amber fish eyes, striped ones, fat aquamarine ones that whirled when she tilted them like a tiny pill galaxy was slowly expanding inside. The pills erased the world’s curiosity and replaced it with a figment of curiosity about the world. The pills took colors and turned them into sounds. All Twyla had to do was lie back and listen.

Together, she and Anther graduated from high school. They changed their names. Twyla became something of a celebrity in the local bar scene:

tending one, drinking in another. Not quite the sort of person who adopted an exotic pet and took it everywhere with her—a chameleon leashed to her lapel, say, or a ferret noodling around in the pouch of her sweatshirt—but not far from it, if she is honest with herself. Anther works for the public radio station, where he reads things in a low, slow, warm voice that is nothing at all like his regular speaking voice (shrill and lemony) or his other voice, his third and secret voice, which even Twyla herself has not heard for a long time. "Fourteen killed in passenger train derailment," says Anther when he is on the radio, and it sounds just the same as when he says, "Up next, a track from Sly and the New Sinners off their album *Plop Culture*," which, of course, is the point.

"Guh," he now says in his radio voice as he eyes the line for the bar over the top of his illusory spectacles. "A dismal procession in the name of progression. Up next: What Kind of Bird Did I Just See? with your hosts Marv and Mike."

Anther's family has money, nothing fabulous but sufficient to the town and the times. They mostly remembered that he was a child while he had been a child and now that he is not they invite him to meals in an amusingly formal way. His mother's stationery hand delivered to his mailbox with the time and date of the Saturday night pot roast, for example. There really is a show on Anther's radio station that is essentially just that: birds, brown ones, in the crepe myrtle, causing a ruckus in bushes along the property line. "They eat the berries," say the callers, whispering in their alarm. "I'm standing at the window and can see them eating the berries right now."

But this is not the right night for gentle humor. Nor for scorn. This is not even the night for the mouthful of creepy crawlies (blue pills that made one fizz in all one's sockets) that Twyla knows Anther has nestled against his crotch. It is cold outside. Pockets of slush refreeze in doorways and women's heels pock the ice on the street as if a giant, assiduous robin has just been through looking for worms in the concrete. "Nope," Twyla imagines it chirping. "Nope. Nope. Nope."

"I'm going to steal it," she says instead, and when Anther says, "What?" she responds by reaching up and untwisting the twine. Then, as he turns to block her from the sight of the rest of the room, Twyla lowers the whole

pendulous assortment of shifting nets and weights, ropes and soft, collapsing space into the maw of her oversized bag.

"There," Twyla says, pleased with herself.

"Wild," says Anther. "C'mon, let's get a drink."

For a week, Twyla leaves the sculpture in its disarray at the bottom of her bag underneath her bed. She transfers her ID, her credit card, a few other pieces of flat, rectilinear plastic to her pants pocket and wears the same pants every day to prevent their accidental loss. At night, standing in the kitchen in her underwear, she washes her pants out in the kitchen sink, scrubbing the stains with dish soap, sluicing water through the beleaguered stitching of the crotch. It is still cold. The skin on her poor white haunches puckers like a plucked goose. She can see herself in the reflection of the living-room windows and thinks she looks raw and anticipatory, just like a plucked goose slung on the counter waiting for the butter rub. Although a plucked goose was no longer waiting, was it? All its bead-eyed inquiry had ended with a single whack of the ax. So, really, anything anticipatory about her thighs had to do with the butter rubber who was imagining the tender pleasure of goose flesh. Not to mention the side dishes. Cozy carrots. Tributaries of overcooked peas. "This is the way a life can dismantle," Twyla thinks, sniffing the crotch of her pants and sliding them back under the water. A series of shapes with no relation to each other but proximity. Geometry no longer concerned with the properties of space. Later, she googles "curious goose" and cries at the images of cocked heads, stretched necks, bright eyes rising up from beneath the edges of tables. She is an expert, after all, on what comes next.

After a week, Twyla hangs the sculpture in the back of her closet—visible only by a parting of the cardigans—and goes back to wearing skirts. The season changes and changes again. Twyla waits for uproar, outrage, manhunt, but the theft does not seem even to have been reported. She reads the papers; she watches the local news. In early June, the show at the gallery is taken down and replaced by a watercolor collective called Plein Air in the Park! Twyla reads about the opening in the Art & Style insert in the local paper. She looks at full-color reproductions of splotchy park

paintings, gladiolas prominent against the water of the city's turgid little river. Then she reads an article about compounding skin-affirming vegetable creams right in your own kitchen and another about the sudden, some might say alarming, popularity of forestry as a major at the local state college. On the back page of the paper is a write-in column that specializes in domestic gripes. "My husband *never* loads the dishwasher," aggrieves one letter writer. "My mother cannot even sign her own name on her checks."

"Same-same," Twyla writes in the paper's margins. She considers elaborating and mailing it in, but finds she cannot elaborate. Her pen runs out of ink. Some kind of bug has eaten all the glue off the backs of all her stamps. Twyla feels small, obscure, even fuzzy. It appears her crime was one of record keeping, her passions masked by the wainscoting. In the understory of the city the mice tussle and bite, perfectly capable of committing a mouse murder over a sunflower seed or knot of coarse twine. Blood sieves between their teeth, she knows; it soaks into the suede of their fur. On the streets of the city, however, a local children's book author has bronze cast statuettes of mice in whimsical poses and tucked them into nooks and crannies for the delight of the pedestrian caste. Mice drink lattes; mice frown down at the paper. Mice are overjoyed by a button or thrust their paws out from under the edge of an umbrella to see if they can still feel the rain. No mice adrift in the flotsam of their minute obsessions—Twyla has checked. No mice mixing too much wine with pills and waking up in the bathtub, or sniffing the cottage cheese before they eat it, or masturbating in surreptitious darkness although the house is empty. No mice shuttering within them the great white light of what must be their own unraveling consciousness, the pure pith of their single, short life. Twyla dabs her tongue against the backs of her nibbled stamps. What might a bug find to delight itself here? she wonders, but if there was a flavor it has long since been consumed. Or maybe her tongue is the wrong shape for tasting. Or maybe no single thing can ever be tasted twice.

At night, not every night, Twyla pulls a chair up to the open closet and parts the cardigans. The sculpture has not been substantially changed by its new locale. Even enclosed by the soft frame of her clothes, the sculpture is

pendulous, testicular; something that seems as if it should wobble, though in fact it stays very still. It contains the implication of water without the element of water. It is dry dry dry, but is easy to imagine dripping wet.

Twyla sits before her closet and imagines water. She uses the sculpture as a kammatthana—a term she learned from the community center's Intro to Buddhism course, taught by a woman named Upshama Valentine—but not a virtuous kammatthana or one that promoted tranquility. "Kammatthana can be repulsive too," said Upshama, reading off a printout of a Wikipedia page. "Consider a corpse," she said, then turned the page over. The other side was blank. "Consider a corpse," she repeated and they all sat silently together on their folding chairs, considering.

Twyla is at work. It is early, but the regulars are all there. Or at least the early regulars, not the late regulars, who come in only after dinner, first drinks, second drinks, outfit changes, first fights, second fights, fraught and messy entanglements, disentanglements, parkinglot lip-gloss applications, parking-lot side-mirror kisses smearing lip-gloss ghost mouths on the side mirrors of the early regulars, just leaving, who never fail to be enraged. The late regulars are local college students, hollering with youth. The early regulars are older, stranger to look at. They have geologic forms: craggy noses, cheeks that sink into the pockets of trapped, black air below them. It is not a nice bar, but it has its moments. For example, one of the regulars is a man who makes a spurious living as a Ben Franklin impersonator, and, in fact, looks just like Ben Franklin with his potato-shaped head and pursed, lascivious mouth. Even out of costume, he seems rumpled with the wear of the intervening centuries. Sometimes he writes Twyla poems on the bar napkins. Once, drunk, he stood weaving in front of her with his tri-cornered hat over his heart and said, "Tonight, my love, your entire body looks like a pussy."

Twyla had looked down at her body—the serviceable thighs under her black skirt, the ropy forearms, sticky with slosh, emerging from the black cuffs of her rolled-up sleeves. Her body had been with her all along and she thought of it in the companionable, irritated way she might think of an elderly dog she no longer entirely trusted on the carpets. "Hello, buddy,"

she thought in the mornings when passing in front of the mirror. “You again,” she thought at night, stepping out of the shower and sliding naked between her sheets.

Twyla has never been one to nickname her vagina, though there is a sort of vagina bravado that is all the rage among a certain subset of bar regulars. “My muff, my pocket-pie, my mouse, my oyster,” say these women, who have wild hair, illustrative makeup, lots of tattoos and visible bruises on their rackety knees like little girls who spend their afternoons in the treetops. “My Lorna Doone, my Anne Boleyn, my hamburglar, my Lurch.” Some of these women are on a Roller Derby team called the Flying Roll-Lindas and they come into the bar after matches still wearing their knee and elbow pads. Their wet, torn team tank tops feature their mascot—a cheesecake pinup with a helmet and mouth guard—as she roller-skates menacingly across a tightrope that appears to be strung between the two towers of the World Trade Center. “This is Roll-Linda,” the women say, laughing, stinking like trapped sweat and hair spray. “You should join the team, Twyla,” they inveigle. “Seriously. You look like you could really bust some shit up.”

Twyla’s role as a semimythic service professional at a popular dive bar in an otherwise thoroughly gentrified part of town tended to encourage people to tell her quite a bit about what she looked like to them. A bruiser, a buster, a bitch. A giant walking vagina, hairy and secretious, with the winking, reflective eyes of a cat. “If my body has names other than my own name,” Twyla asks one of the Roll-Lindas, “then isn’t it actually something different than myself?”

“So what are you saying, Twyla?” a Roll-Linda roars, sloshing her drink like a pirate. “Do you call your little pussy-pie by your own first name?” This is greeted by general hilarity. Even some of the early regulars look over as if waiting for her to reply, though probably it is only the light winking off the Roll-Linda’s sequin-emblazoned hot pants that has caught their attention. Like lizards they blink first one eye, then the other. They dab out their tongues to taste the air for danger or for prey.

“Yes,” Twyla says, as she swabs down the table and strings empties along her thumbs. “I guess I do.” As she walks away, a Roll-Linda playfully slaps

her on the rump but her aim is slightly off and she grazes a stinging knuckler against Twyla's hip instead. "Punched in the ass," Twyla says to Ben Franklin when she gets back to the bar. He nods seriously and writes her a poem that rhymes "ass" and "foie gras." Twyla tucks it into her bra.

Later that night, she tries it. "Twyla," she whispers, stroking herself first this way, then that. "Twyla," she wheedles, rolling over and working with her thumb. When nothing happens but an orgasm, Twyla is disproportionately disappointed. What would her vagina say to her if she could only conjure up its one true name? Hopefully, it would not just be a list of grievances. Names were words of power, Twyla knew. They were exposers of secrets, openers of doors, lines of code that answered unasked questions, lights that shone into vast interiorities subsequently revealed to be filled with rare and precious stones. "Treasure seeker," Twyla accused, but no one answered as the night was late and stale and Twyla lived alone.

As a child, Twyla wanted to be a prospector. She had watched a PBS special in which reenactors in appealingly spattered vests and gapthroated shirts sat with their boots in the mud and thumbed up the secrets of the earth. It had seemed to her, at age eight, a perfect combination of her desire to be history's victim (marked by the filth and homespun wear of her own heedless subservience to destiny) and her desire to uncover … something … anything. Something secret that someone else wanted. Something small enough to hide in her pocket and roll in her palm in times of stress.

"Not that I thought of it in those terms," she said to Anther when she told him this story. "I was only eight!" But she did think of it in those terms. In exactly those terms. In the third grade they did a unit on the Civil War. For extra credit, Twyla, who was not yet named Twyla, came every day dressed as one of the wounded. On Monday an arm in a sling; on Tuesday a bandage dyed with red Kool-Aid wrapped around her head. By Thursday she was an amputee, and Friday, dead: dead in the hallway, dead in the cafeteria, dead in the reading nook at the back of the class, bloating among the colorful beanbags and the leering cardboard cutout of the Cat in the Hat manhandling a terrified fish. The teacher called home. Conferences were established and conducted. Her mother, such a long-ago personage, came

home from one of these in her serious clothes—a pin-striped skirt and loose, goosey heels left over from a secretarial stint—and clattered up the stairs, where she found not-yet-Twyla in her little room at her little desk doing some little work. Fat-pencil work. Rubbery-nubbin eraser work. The difficult lineup of finger and thumb required to entice the kinds of thoughts necessary to higher learning. Sometimes, when the weather was windy, not-yet-Twyla would go out into the yard and lie under the black walnut with her eyes shut in the hopes that a direct strike by a black walnut would drive discovery into her noggin—that she would open her eyes onto a world suddenly prismatic with insight—but she was never struck.

Her mother sat on the edge of her bed and picked at her nylons as she recounted the he-said/she-said/he-said/I-said of her meeting with not-yet-Twyla's teacher, principal, school psychologist. "Honey," her mother said, "kitty-cat. I am your fierce protector here, you know? I am your momma bear roaring out of the cave. In the springtime. When they're hungry and they've got those little baby bears to feed?" Twyla's mother looked faraway even when she was right up close. She had a kind of smudgy face, as if faded by distance, and had used it to good effect as a photographer's model in her younger days. This was what attracted Twyla's father when he and her mother first met—her smudgy, faraway face and her tight, precise, right-there body, which she often dressed in oversized clothes as if she were a doll or a wet infant animal just about to be tipped out onto the lawn.

Earlier that year, when not-yet-Twyla had written in "Gold Prospector" in response to the third grade's annual career-day quiz and had gotten a frowny-face stamp from the teacher with the encouragement to "Aim for your full potential," not-yet-Twyla's mother had buried all her bracelets and rings, including her wedding ring, in the backyard sandbox and sent not-yet-Twyla out there with a pie pan and a hose. But this day was not one of her good days and she had become lost in her own metaphor. "A momma bear gives birth in the dark," she said as not-yet-Twyla practiced the cursive letter *i*. "She doesn't even know her cubs, which are only the length of my forearm, are there. She could roll over on them. She could accidentally smash them under her paws." None of this was news to not-yet-Twyla. Her mother was culling her information from a nature show they had watched

together: the squalling cubs caught in gray scale on the hidden den-cam, their almost dog faces yowling soundlessly in the dark. I i i, not-yet-Twyla wrote. She dotted each dot round and empty as a bubble though her teacher marked off for that. She imagined each dot floating up and away.

"A mother bear could swallow her cub whole in her sleep," her mother went on absently. "She could dream she was eating a honey pot and scoop the poor little thing right up." Her mother smacked her jaws as if she were chawing on the drippings of a particularly sticky honey pot. She looked out the window. "Imagine how bad she'd feel then," she said to the magnolia in the front yard. "When she woke up to all that blood."

For some time, they lived this way together. Twyla's father went to work and came home. He went to work and came home. In the evenings, he sometimes hung pictures from clotheslines he had strung across the living room and looked at them in commiseration. The pictures were of internal events—arrangements of atoms, momentary spasms caught in strobe. Family portraits; pregnancies; engagements; the brief, soft flush of a child looking away from a harsh light. The fact that they were all strangers and strung across the living room made the photographs seem like evidence or an homage to the past constructed after some equally long-ago disaster. Life as it was Before. But Before what? The family; the marriage; the first, crushing love? The childhood, the continent, the earth, the universe? Twyla was curious. What did her father see when he looked at images meant to commemorate someone else's time line? How did he place himself among them—a reflection in sunglasses, dilated pupil, birdbath, convex mirror? One day, when she was still quite young, she had asked her father, "Are you an artist?"—a provocation she understood even then—and her father had growled at her, showed his teeth like a dog, and actually growled as he backed out of the room.

Twyla's father was tall and bald and curt and blasé. He smoked a little pot in the basement; he read *The New Criterion* and wrote *mendacious*, *corrosive*, or *spurious* in the margin in his square, runic hand. He was not likable in the sense that it was possible to like him. Watching him string the scornful pictures of sleeping babies maneuvered into barnyard scenes or

identically dressed family units arranged in descending order along the limb of a massive live oak, it was entirely possible for almost-Twyla to believe that her father was some other order of creature altogether. An insect overlord wryly documenting the indigenous species before their sublimation into the hive. A time-traveling replicant from the far-distant future when men were brains in jars and women had been replaced by tasteful arrangements of potted plants.

Then Twyla's mother died. The order was wrong. Twyla's mother left; Twyla's mother had a baby; Twyla's mother worked as a bartender in a bar by the beach where women with legs like rubber Slinkys stood on top of the bar and slowly, slowly lifted their skirts; Twyla's mother peered out between the legs of other women, other women's legs the flaps of a tent parting before Twyla's mother's face, small as a mouse's face, that was parched; Twyla's mother had visions of God—God perched on the end of a swizzle stick, God peering down from a ginkgo tree; Twyla's mother married the man with whom she had the baby, a girl, named Jancie; Twyla's mother left the man, left Jancie, moved in with God in a tent on the beach, peered out through the flaps of her tent at the surf, the sky; Twyla's mother stopped eating; Twyla's mother stopped drinking, in ecstasy, on the beach, under the hand of God, who laid his hand over her stomach to calm her the way she had laid her hand over the stomachs of her babies in the night when they woke up and did not know they were in the world. Twyla's mother posted all this on her Facebook account. There were pictures. There were grim collages. Her friends, women Twyla did not know, wrote: "Honey, please give me a call," to which Twyla's mother responded: like. Twyla's mother liked the sky, the sea, her babies, the hand of God. Twyla's mother died.

By then Twyla was Twyla. She and Anther took a handful of pills before the funeral so that the sheen of the soft spring rain on the lid of the coffin was either a product of the soft spring rain on the lid of the coffin or a product of her own eyes quivering behind the soft spring sheen of pills. She took at least a couple too many pills so that she was unreliable and could not hold her sister, Jancie, now a toddler and largely left to the great, peeping glee of her own recognizance. "What a spiral," said Twyla's aunt,

her mother's sister. She shook her head, in admiration, it seemed. In awe. "What a descent." This as the coffin sat graveside, a sleek pod washed in flowers. This as the rain picked up, then poured, and the crowd dispersed. Twyla's mother's new husband had a weak chin, buckteeth, the bulging, old-fashioned eyes of a thyroid patient or Benzedrine addict. He had befuddled hands that he rested on top of his daughter's head as she passed below.

Twyla's father shook his hand, stepped out into the rain, walked away. The new husband also left, Jancie's head pressed under his chin, her fine, dark hair rising to cover his mouth. Soon it was just Twyla and Anther and the cemetery employees, who were in no hurry. Anther shared from his pocket. Twyla did a little dance. Twisty and sorrowful. A dance about rain and, if she had had multiple scarves to flutter, a dance that would have involved scarves fluttering in the rain. Fluttering o'er top the dirt that had been removed from the hole in order to reveal the hole into which the cemetery employees would soon lower her mother and which was now leaking out from under its tarp in a slick of red mud that spattered her ankles. And that was the point, was it not? The hole that was uncovered, not created. The hole that had always been there, waiting for excavation.

No. No. The point was her mother—her hands on which the rings were always loose, her blunt, square toes. Her mother running her fingers under and under Twyla's chin. Today would soon be a day that was over. And the next day another. And another. Her mother was bathed in the orange glow of a tent, the orange glow of the sun, the orange glow of spiritual excess or no food but carrots filched from the bar's salad buffet. Her mother pointed her square toes toward the ocean. She waited, patiently, for rapture. And now, postrapture, her mother was arranged in a sleek pod as if for interstellar travel. The hole had never been there until just that morning when the same cemetery employee who now clapped for her, or the one who now whistled, had dug it out of the solid earth with a backhoe. Breaking the body of the earth. Pocking it full of useless dens in which no one would ever sleep.

No. Not the point.

Her mother. Her mother. Her mother.

She was curious. Was there a point?

No, she concluded. None.

Twyla pulls a kitchen chair up in front of the closet. She parts the curtains. She sits. Divine means thunderstruck—waiting is part of it, she reassures herself. Still, a long time passes. Twyla tries some gentle encouragement. She strikes yoga poses: Downward Dog, Half Lord of the Fishes, King Pigeon. She smokes a joint. For a week she eats nothing but vegetable broth, and waits. The next week she eats nothing but ice water, and waits. In front of the closet, Twyla makes low, slow noises, then high, chittering noises, then no noise but the sound of her breath through her nose, which, annoyingly, whistles. Seek absolution, seek entropy, seek enlightenment, seek collapse. Twyla seeks with her eyes closed, the object held in her mind like a cupped hand holds water. Twyla seeks with her eyes open, the object outside of her mind and her mind filled with … water? … entropy? … cupped hands? It is fall and the town is disabling its crepe myrtles. Up and down all the drowsy blocks, chain saws whir the trees down to warty clubs. Mums season! Decorative gourds! If I'm still doing this by Halloween, Twyla thinks, but what is she doing? Twyla's curiosity is laissez-faire. Before the cave of the great unknown, she stands in Mountain Pose, firmly planted. Seek restitution, seek recidivism, seek rationale, seek right. Seek apraxia, apogee, ascension, aardvark. What might emerge from the cave can be altered by too much peering. Twyla seeks by refusing to wonder. She denies herself the living pulse of her own inquiry and in so doing is gifted nothing more interesting than the world.

At work, Twyla is distracted and unpleasant. She gets drink orders wrong. She ignores the regulars' gesticulating arms. "What's the matter with you, grrrrl?" asks a Flying Roll-Linda.

"I no longer have any faith in myself as a character," Twyla does not say. "I dislike all my institutional gestures. I lack creative emphasis and harbor mediocrity. I ambiguate with neither design nor focus. I have too many artists for friends."

If she had a sense she was getting closer to something … If she had a sense that something was approaching her, wary, skittish as an animal

unhabituated to human touch, but still approaching, attracted, sidling her way. …

"What do you want?" Twyla says. "I mean, what kind of drink?"

In the evening, Twyla strips off all her clothes and stands in front of the dark window. Outside, children with leaves painted on their cheeks are delighted by some hay bales, a scarecrow, a man juggling sugar pumpkins, the fading light. The sculpture hangs in a dark corner. Twyla hangs in a dark corner. The sculpture is still, parched, uninhabited. Twyla is still, parched, bursting full.

"What am I doing wrong?" Twyla asks the sculpture, but it refuses to reply.

When she imagines whatever it is she seeks, Twyla sees an orange light, orange as a slice of orange held up to filter the sun. She sees her own toes stretched out before her and between them a wavering triangle of blue. She feels hot and sticky, gritty, tired. In her dark apartment, in her dark bedroom, before the dark closet in which hangs a collection of metal weights shaped like stones, Twyla holds up her hands and peeks through her fingers. She is more than curious now. She is perilously close to fully involved. Where is the crack in her life through which something strange must peer? There are no eyes here that regard her. It's almost as if no one can see her at all.

Anther knocks on the door, the era of window entrance long passed, and when Twyla answers he says, "Breaking News: Homo Erectus Sued for Sexual Misconduct by School Librarian. Local Leaders Say They Didn't Know She Had It In Her." Then he looks more closely at her and says, in another voice, "Oooo, seriously, what's wrong with you?"

The worst part is how long this might go on. How had her mother stood it—all those years of being herself? No, the worst part is how long it has already gone on, and how many witnesses there appear to be. Anther holds out a bottle of wine in a paper sack, the neck of which he has wrung on his way up the stairs until it cleaves to the side of the bottle like the crinkly brown skin of an over-bloomed flower. "What is this?" he says, looking at the open closet, her bare stomach, the luminous, diffident light. "It's like a Chekhov play restaged by mole people. At any moment someone's going to

burrow up through the floor and start complaining about their provincial ennui."

Anther waits for the applause and when none comes he says, a little testily, "I haven't seen you for a while. I thought you might need a pick-me-up."

Into her cupped hand, three silver pills round as pips. As she slips them into her mouth, Twyla thinks, "Who could blame me?" Then later, "You are a different sort of animal than this."

"Than what?" Anther says. He has crawled into the closet and is curled like a cat on a pile of sweaters he has pulled down from their hangers. The hangers sway and bang. Behind them, the weights are still. That sculpture is cut-rate, Twyla thinks. Secondhand, conceptually half price. Just like me to steal a clearance sale, she thinks, or maybe says out loud.

"You should get a dog," Anther says from the middle of his deepblue dream. "You're the kind of person who needs something to lick her hand."

In November, Anther is beaten very badly in a street robbery. They—there were three of Them—had a gun and hit Anther in the head with the gun, then kicked Anther in the face with their boots as he lay on the wet, leaf-plastered ground still smattered with pumpkin essence. There was a vegetative smell, here and there a lone seed entangled in its gut work that Anther had time to examine up close and personal before his eye swelled shut. It was early in the morning hours. Anther was on his way home. Robbed, of course, he was robbed—cash, credit cards, driver's license—but also robbed of his other booty and they knew just where to find it. A casual hand down the front of his pants, lobbing aside his penis and testicles. The little bag snagging for just a moment on the teeth of his zipper, then free, and Theirs, and another boot for good measure, which broke his jaw, which is now wired shut so he cannot speak.

Anther writes all this down for Twyla, not in so many words, though he does mention the pumpkin seed. He uses a yellow legal pad his mother has brought for him, backups stacked on the neoprene couch in the corner of his recovery room. After she reads each sheet, Twyla tears it from the pad, crumples it into a ball, and tosses it into the wastepaper basket beside his

bed. She has to restrain herself from writing her end of the conversation back to him. As it is, she says very little. Her voice sounds strained, condescending, suspicious in the way people who were unpopular in school sound when talking to small children massed together in a group. No matter what Twyla uses it to say, her voice sounds like this. One of Anther's eyes is so swollen and black it looks like an overripe plum, as if, were she to press on it just slightly, the black plum skin would split and the sunset pulp come oozing out. The other eye is open, but awash with blood. Anther's nose is broken. He has stitches in a rainbow arc above his left ear, each black twitch of thread tugging the pale skin below it into a pucker. "I guess you're not going to be passing out blow jobs anytime soon," says Twyla in a voice that sounds like she said, "Does your mother know you have those cookies? Did she say it was OK?"

"Fuck you," Anther writes and glares at her. Or maybe he glares. It is hard to read the expression in a blood eye. Ire? Indignation? It is upsetting to admit, but in the hospital bed, his body smoothed into associated shapes by the uniform hospital sheet, Anther is powerfully appealing to Twyla. Maybe it is because he can't speak and misdirect her with performance. Maybe it's because she cannot ever remember him this way—neither coming nor going and with nothing cupped in the palm of his hand. Twyla has been doing better as of late. A little better. In the morning she goes to the store on the corner of her street and buys coffee in a Styrofoam cup. She drinks it sitting on a park bench beside a monumental public sculpture of yellow coiling girders that has always reminded her of a monumental pile of steaming dog shit. It is tucked into a square bordered by a Waffle House and an auto parts store. Across the street, a phalanx of new parking garages is going up. Twyla scallops the rim of her cup with her fingernails and watches men in hard hats straddle the girders as they tack Tyvek sheeting to the provisional walls. Twyla feels she has come through a kind of training ground and, upon scaling the final impossible muck-covered wall, has found spread out before her another vast training ground, this one filled not with silence but with nauseating detail. Styrofoam, for example. Tyvek. Yellow. Tacktack-tack.

Anther has a hospital smell to him—plastic antiseptic smell traced underneath with the iron of old blood. When he writes again on the pad, Twyla notices blood under his fingernails; his own, she is sure. When he turns his head gingerly on the sheet, reaching to sip a little water through his special pink plastic hospital mug with built-in straw, Twyla notices a ring of blood deep in his ear canal, which is surprisingly red and articulate. A precise, tiny rivulet of blood that has left Anther's body but still lingers like a … She cannot think what it would be like. It is like nothing else but what it is. A tiny ring of blood deep inside Anther's ear.

Anther is writing and writing on the pad. He has always had so much to say and she so little. In some ways, their friendship has been a process of osmosis, each eagerly rushing into the space where they were not. What did they think they would find there that was so unlike themselves? Human beings come in a limited array of forms and, whatever else they may have imagined, that is what they are. Gingerbread shapes stamped in a line. Factory-fresh. Qualitycontrolled. What is the point of exploration when it always leads to the same location? Twyla wonders. By the edge of a lake, at the peak of a mountain, deep beneath the earth, in the back of one's own closet. It's always the same place when the person who gets there is you. Better to close your eyes, Twyla thinks. Better to curl up in a ball and go to sleep.

Twyla imagines lifting Anther's sheet and burrowing in. She imagines pulling down his hospital pants—or lifting a gown; what is he wearing down there?—and sliding the little pug of his penis out reverentially, as if it were an artifact of great antiquity, something whose intricate detail can only be fully appreciated with a magnifying lens screwed deep into the socket of the eye. She imagines slipping him into her mouth and swirling her tongue until, in spite of himself, he rises into her, fills her, perhaps even—she has faith in him—makes her gag. Anther has never wanted her. He has always been only incidentally curious about the mechanisms of her form: a big, heedless dog's body snuffling around in her life. Yet, Twyla goes so far as to finger the corner of the sheet—so cheap it is almost as stiff as paper—as she imagines the taste of Anther's semen in the back of her throat. Musty like mushrooms or the pages of a damp book. Sharp like blood. It is not a

question of when she will kill herself, Twyla decides, but of how. She'd like it to be entirely passive. She'd like to kill herself by standing so still in one spot that eventually, through the law of impossible averages, a meteorite would spin out of the sky and bury itself in her head. She'd like to kill herself by slipping down the drain with the water from her bath.

Anther is still writing. Every now and then, he looks up from the page to stare at her with that inscrutable blood eye as if he is not writing but sketching. As if she were a reference point that he needed to correct his course. She has been here for hours. For a while she even held his hand while he slept, though when his mother came in with flowers, more yellow pads, a warm pair of socks that she slipped onto Anther's feet so deftly he didn't even stir in his sleep, Twyla let him go guiltily, as if she had been caught posing him for a picture. Putting a funny hat on his head. Slipping a cigarette between his broken lips.

While Anther was asleep, Twyla turned his hand up and uncurled his fingers. There was a padded foam clip on the end of his index finger (stomped) that complicated things somewhat, but otherwise it was not so difficult at all to lay her head down and fit her cheek within his upturned palm. When nothing happened, Twyla laid her head next to his on the pillow. She might even have gone to sleep. Once, long ago, almost-Twyla woke up in the middle of the night to find Anther cuddling her from behind. It was not raining, had not been raining, but his pant cuffs were wet and the water had wicked up his pants almost to his knees. "What were you doing? Standing in a river?" she asked. Her sheets were damp, her toes cold. Strands of her hair were in his mouth.

"I wasn't doing anything," he murmured through her hair. "I was standing in your yard."

Even then, even so young, she knew he wasn't as lost as he wanted to believe. Probably standing in the birdbath, she thought. For the effect of the footprints up the drive. Almost-Twyla had said, "What do you want?" very gently but Anther said nothing, only sighed, and his breath was sweet like her breath and they were children wobbling on the edge of sleep. Almost-Twyla had turned then and pressed her body against his body. Their shoulders were the same breadth, but his legs were longer. Their lips were

the same shape, but his were thinner and cooler and crooked in a smile. “What do *you* want?” said her very best and only friend. Almost-Twyla opened her mouth, curious as to what she would say in return, but nothing came out. A little while later they were asleep and, in the morning, her father found them there and yelled until he coughed a gob of blood onto her carpet, where it left a stain.

Time is not a tonic, Twyla thought, suddenly awake and a little frantic. She looked around the room from her vantage on Anther’s pillow but there was nothing to help her. A blank television screen. A sink. An end table wild with roses. Twyla composed herself and thought of a corpse. Nose to toes. She breathed in, out, in. Upshama Valentine had meant a corpse flung in the road, Twyla feels certain. She meant the dress pulled up the mottled thighs, the slack belly twisting unseen, the disordered bones, the lolling neck, but Twyla’s corpse is always decorously laid out. Twyla’s corpse is wearing earrings that perfectly match the baubles that shine on the toes of her shoes. Next to her, Anther shifted slightly in his sleep and said nothing. Twyla opened her own mouth, but whatever was in there still would not come out. Perhaps it was her the whatever repudiated and not the larger world. Perhaps the whatever was so disgusted at the thought of her gaze it preferred to live forever in the dank anonymity of her physical state. A horrible thought. Twyla shuddered and forced herself to concentrate.

Her corpse’s hands are folded, fingers interlaced. Her corpse’s hair has been teased out of its matted curls and lipstick has been applied to her corpse’s peeling lips. Her corpse was buried in a business suit because there was nothing else of hers left behind, not in the whole house. Not a scrap, not a slip, not a sock. Her corpse’s name is engraved on a shiny stone in a garden chock-full of them and underneath someone has left her corpse a ceramic teddy bear, a comical ceramic toad, a vase of wilting flowers that will be cleared away by the groundskeepers at the end of the week, four tiny pills as black as the total lack of light.

Something in Anther’s blank cheek made Twyla think he was awake, but even so she didn’t move. In her mouth the word was peering around, taking it all in. It didn’t like what it saw, Twyla knew, but still she lay on the pillow with Anther, mouth open, breathing in, breathing out, waiting. Through

Anther's window Twyla could see the hospital night shift ascending a hill into the parking garage. The cars processed. In the gloaming, their lights came on. She tried to imagine the cars as a line of something else: ants, bees, blinking squid luminescing with hunger or regret. Or cars. Just, you know, like *cars*. With people in them who are late for work. People wearing sensible shoes, surrounded by the drift and glow of the soft, easy, growing darkness they will labor all night to keep at bay. Anther sighed. Twyla waited. Nothing emerged between them. The room grew dark.

Sometime later, in the decrepit light of the fluorescent overheads, Anther finishes writing on the pad. He underlines something once, twice, fixes her again with his eye. What does he see? Twyla imagines herself a vessel, a stringently empty pot. "Fill her up, boys," Twyla thinks and holds her breath and waits. Then, feeling just the slightest, most ticklish slight tickle of impatience, she evokes. "Anther," she says and holds out her blameless hand. But Anther doesn't pass her the pad. Instead, brow furrowed, he tears the pages—one, two, three, all thickly filled—crumples them, and drops them in the wastepaper basket at his side. He writes again and turns it to her:

My name is Adam.
No one calls me Anther anymore but you.
Your name is Tricia.
It's getting late. Why are you still here?

That night, Twyla did not think about Jancie, who is now seven and going into second grade; rather, she picked up a man at the bar and took him home. He is somebody who has hovered around the edges drinking quietly for some time now. A month? A year? She thinks one of the Flying Roll-Lindas told her he used to be a truck driver and now he has become someone who used to be a truck driver. Twyla likes his forearms. She has a vague idea that the forearm is a part of the body a person would develop as an incidental benefit to truck driving. That and stereoscopic vision. Oh, enough, enough: he has a good tan; they drink wine on the couch. It stains

their teeth an X-ray color and when they kiss the man tastes so much like the way her own mouth tastes to her that Twyla thinks it is like kissing a mirror, though one with hands and stubble. One that is sort of exhausted, but still willing. Twyla can see in the bend of his neck and the lines that crease around his mouth that in another few years he will have tipped irrevocably into the other half of his life—the lonely half—and this is something else she finds attractive about him. He is like a still frame on a video. Behind him she can almost see the shape of the frying pan that will knock him silly. *Kwahang!* is the sound this man's future makes. Followed perhaps by *splut*.

Still, Twyla knows she has made the right choice for this evening. For example: when the man is on top of her he moves her the way he would like her to move just enough times that she catches on and moves that way herself. For example: they do not talk. The neighbor's porch light is blinking on and off, on and off. He doesn't ask her "Like this?" or "OK?" and she doesn't say "God" or "Yes" or "Good" or "Slow." She gives him nothing. It doesn't matter. Her curiosity about him is laissez-faire. She will know what comes to be known—but what will that *be*? (she cannot help herself), but when will it come? It is possible—the light blinks on and off—that in the moment of their fucking this man doesn't exist. A figment not of imagination, but of happenstance. She comes and then she is done and will not move anymore. Shortly afterward he finishes as well and rolls over next to her, his hand falling over her hand as his body shifts. She squeezes it. He squeezes back. The light blinks.

After a while, Twyla gets out of bed and leaves him sleeping. She goes to the window and looks out on the empty street. A bicycle chained to a tree. Green trash cans pulled to the curb at every house. Two doors down someone has left the light on in the kitchen and Twyla can see their empty kitchen table, a bookshelf behind it stacked with cookbooks, the corner of a picture that might display a woman's hand holding a basket of fruit. In the kitchen go kitchen things, and in the bedroom, the bathroom, the room for living, etc. This is the way it has been ordained. Perhaps even from on high. Twyla goes to the closet and parts the cardigans. She lifts the sculpture out by its string and stands for a while at the foot of the bed holding it. The man

sleeps on his side, curled into a ball. She can see the line of his spine, the appeal of one naked foot flung on top of the sheets. The sheets and her quilt are tucked up between his legs, his hands slipped between his thighs—the entrusted body, left behind. She wants to reach out and run her finger along the arch of his foot, but considers what she will look like to him if he wakes up—a shape of darkness in the darkness, something strange in her hand (what is in her hand?), someone he cannot convince himself he knows. He is a stranger, but she doesn't want to scare him. From now on whenever a person—or even an animal: a squirrel, a pigeon—looks at her, Twyla wants them to feel only mild surprise. Like, "Oh, I didn't know anyone was standing there," and then the empty, humming space wherein she is supposed to demur and step out of the way. Instead, she goes to the window, opens it, and leans out.

Jancie has brown hair, cut straight across her forehead, and her father's googly eyes in brown. Twyla has not seen her since the funeral, but her own father forwarded her some pictures. Jancie in a pumpkin patch astride a hay bale. Jancie at the water park, the zoo. Jancie, much younger, in what must be her very own room, looking up from a book held in her lap. Jancie's father has just called her name to get her attention. He stands at the window—his shadow crisp across the square of sunlight on her carpet—and holds the camera before his face so that she can't see his eyes. But it is him, the child knows. Her father: body, smell, stance. Her father: hands, hair, swallow, click. Camera down, "Jancie? Can't you smile?" and all over again. A second after this picture was taken, Jancie turned her head back down to her book, the pages of which Twyla can't see. There is a witch in there, or a tiger. Some other creature a child might trace with the tip of a finger and then put that finger in her mouth. Snake, rabbit, spider, monkey. Mouse, mouse, mouse.

Twyla leans out the window and lets the sculpture dangle from her fist. It pendulums on its cord, metal weights very softly clinking against each other. Gravity sways it; the nets conceal it; the woman who made it made its man shapes over and over. Too many testicles for one man's body so the body must not be invisible and thus these weights dependent, but rather severed and thus these weights trophies. Or relics? Or a bounty netted like

fish? Twyla considers that when she stole the sculpture she did so to scratch the itch she always gets when no one is looking at her. Now, though, leaning out the window with her arm starting to ache from the sculpture's unpredictable weight, Twyla is curious. No one is looking, but what is she doing? Behind her, the man she does not know shifts in the bed, further entangles himself in her sheets. What is the size of the shape missing from her and Jancie's life? What is the shape of the nothing that still refuses to give up this nonsense and just come home? The street remains empty. Shadows lie uncast across the moon. The shape of nothing is another nothing that stands beside it: a father in the window taking pictures in which he includes his thumb/a father in the living room hanging pictures in which people he doesn't know beam toward him, faces suffused with desire. A mother in the bed at night smoothing back her hair/a mother lost in the orange light, not even a gingerbread outline to know her by.

In the bed behind her the rustling has taken on a kind of intent. Is it an untangling noise? An arising noise? It seems like a little too much noise for one man in his good body who had been probably too pretty a boy and would be, in his old age, grotesque. Doll's eyes, too blue, pressed into a horse's head. A sunken spot where the frying pan kwahanged him. Liver spots on the forearms from too much sun. What will Twyla see if she turns around just now? What will she see if she does not?

"I don't know the answer to any of this," thinks Twyla. But what she says in the second just before she lets the sculpture drop—spectacularly, smashing the windshield of her neighbor's car, bathing the street in the hoots and whistles of the car alarm, lights on one by one in all the bedroom windows, curtains drawn back, doors opening, "What's that?," "Who's that?," the night a blurt of orange panic strobing in the center of all its surrounding days—is the one word she has kept always just underneath her tongue. Evicted, it wobbles out into the darkness and disappears. If it looks back, Twyla doesn't see it. If it waves goodbye, that gesture too is lost. Its curiosity is projected forward, intent only on what it will become. And if you'd like to know just what that will be, then open up your own mouth. Turn it out into the air.

Three Poems

Gerard Malanga

A PHOTOGRAPH OF YESTERDAY & YESTERYEAR

I find it odd to be talking to a photograph of you.
You—yes, you!
But what other choice is there?
It's not like I can make some existential leap,
some guess of guesses,
through the emulsion of the several prints surviving.
It's not like just you, the tonalities,
the lights & darks.
In fact, the shot of you taken at some city beach
was of a sunless grayish gray.
I could hear the chatter in the background, off the frame.
The vendor hawking Nathan's hot dogs.
Breyers ice cream. Nedick's soft drinks.
What seemingly appears to be a boardwalk in the near & far distances
is but a dead giveaway for Coney Island.
Yet it could be anywhere.
I don't know of any other beach that parades a boardwalk.
It's a crapshoot of description & deception.
There's no way that you can come alive for me
than who you were for someone else,
a group of friends.
Even the photographer who remains mysterious,
though my hunch is Emma, my mom, before she married,
may have snapped you.
Why else would she have had these many prints of you
mixed up with all the rest, if you & she were never friends?

But beyond that you remain a mystery. Why?
I wouldn't know whom to ask, where else to look.
All I can do is stare & stare, and maybe maybe something might click.
But there's no way I can hear you.
There's nothing to disclose.
The stoop you sat on.
The beach where you reclined on a towel in the sand,
or the trees that loom behind you.
Was it Glen Island? Was it Pelham Park?
Why would anyone be taking your photograph on so many different days
or weeks or months? Can you answer that?
If I name you, will that make you come alive?
How does Cora sound? Cora?
You look like a Cora.
And yet I never met a Cora in my early adolescence;
even in my teenage years.

*

I can't recall.
And surely Emma never mentioned you.
Who are you?
I can't place the place,
nor can I place your name because you haven't told me.
I haven't heard you.

Speak, speak to me.

JERRY & ME

I wish I could be that kid in the snapshot from 1951.
My First Communion suit sized and stitched by hand to fit by Jerry
with tender loving care. The pride shown on his face
looking down at me as I awkwardly looked on,
and on this day
still small for my age, age eight.
Gradually I'd outgrow Jerry, but not by much.

He'd trail my curiosity of awe and wonder
with his curiosity as well. His silent guidance.
What would he be thinking had I asked? What was I seeing?
My dad is history.
My childhood is history.
My reverie had ended.
We stood in the breezy midst of a rooftop silence in the Bronx.

ALAIN DISTER, JOURNEYMAN PHOTOGRAPHER, 1941–2008

You and I barely said a word through all our smiles,
the briefest of our times,
yet we knew
each other well. We could relate,
as if we stepped through pictures we could see, afar and near,
or any grainy picture you and I had taken side by side.
A drizzled street in Paris in the early hours
or late later in the day.
A southwestern desert vista, a desert calm.
A nightclub in New York.
We understood each other's silences.
We understand, even now.
That is our way,
the nature of our way.
How the next picture's made without a thought
and how it's time to put the camera down and just to *see*.
What counts is the curiosity.
We move in those peripheries.

An Anatomy of Curiosity

Martine Bellen

1. CURIOSITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE WITH TIME

Hourglass, shadow clock, circadian trap

Structural mirror ticks the story's timer

As we dance farther from the center of the universe

The story proceeds from the Heavens to Earth to the Underworld.
A construct of imagination with concealed collective cache. Minutia
slows the bloodstream; permeable skin stretches the search.

(From *Cupid and Psyche*: Then the recurring dreams began … *look at him*, the voices whispered, *see him for who he is … you know you want to know*, they nagged in my sleep. So I opened my eyes, and he was lovely and, like a gangster, armed. I scratched myself with the tip of something sharp. And he transformed into *the* most amazing creature, the only one for me. Of course, that's when he ran. I had wounded him.)

Beyond stream there is a vastness, an unseen site:
The smell of brine, the small of its back.
Turning on its side and stealing away. It snores,
Expels the swells of a shell wave. Miles of swirling hours. Passing
Storm through a still sky. Of swimming

Updream with rosy salmon,
A sunset melting its liquid light cubes into the glassy sea
Or the turbulence of breaching humpbacks
rolling around the sheets of ocean before dipping into the
below.

2. THEORY OF COGNITION AND MOTIVATION

Psychologists don't question their quest for collecting truths from the black box of the brain, all the while knowing it distracts from our collective purpose.

Consider how the right and left lobes drive the directives of two mistresses, the Detective and Psychic. Hemispheres of land beneath a surface of chaos, Chronos. How expansive is this dream, this machine, this *time*, moving us together on a mechanism, *this* travelator.

Answers arise by sitting with breath. An open heart/mind. No Atman. No permanent Self.

Face the mirror, Janus. Face the wall.

3. MEASURE OF AND CONCEPTUALIZED CURIOSITY

In certain geographical regions curiosity is a blight, one that spreads
virally,
destroying hectares and administrative terrain
more expansive than a city,
though smaller than the breadth of curiosity.

4. HEMISPHERICAL BRAIN

Fated to a lonely meadow.

Pines will grow.

Pine needles suture you to earth,
your seams burst as you attempt to soar,
one-of-a-kind buttons, eye hooks:
an orchestral setting of notions.
Patterns pervade, override the redesign.

5. THE CURIOSITY MODEL

Mapping the microcircuitry of the brain

6. CURIOSITY TYPES

Bone flap and blooming flight

Toward the spiral house
Stations of the stars crossing the parting sky

We wave at it as it passes
Old passageways
That have been renovated

Look inside your bones
For your bonus
A safe delivery system

7. THE ARCHITECTURE OF CURIOSITY

Psyche fades into a hungry ghost, following streams to quench fiery passion

that cannot be cooled. She is dressed daily in fresh tears and rented underwear
by Worry and Sadness.

Questions arise from the stem of the body.
It might start as a rapid pulse, roots balancing your strength.
It might start as a bend in streams and a surge
To upending, an opening. It might
Start as a stand of soft wood trees, useless wood.
A cowbird's egg dropped in a black-capped vireo's nest.
The Migratory Bird Treaty cracks.
Questions float over spaces of water,
Fog thick.

There's the gamble, the hunt, the chase,
And addiction to gambling, hunting, chasing.
Soul and Desire sit on opposite sides of the gaming table.
Mystery Religion cutting Major Arcana cards.

The questions appear answered,
And yet you cannot complete your study,
Cannot believe the data. The infinite tug for more.

Tides of welling language rebleed sterile fields with brain irradiation. Swelling.

Psyche: When I lit the candle, I dreamed of beholding the prince whose heart
and bed I shared. And there he was! Shouldn't we see with clear vision those
we sleep beside? What wrong had I committed? Who is he? Who am I?

Think of a dream seamstress, a songster, a siren,
A shore breeze with wavy tresses

Blowing out the beaks of pipers,
The hollow low notes that dip on the concave clavicle
Wending viola strings
Think of the pattern cutter, a dreamstress,
Tree witness and earlobe globes.

Nothing permitted, permanent
The writhen octopus
Or octave written in wind

Cupīdō; (or desire) compels our hunting drive.

A rocking horse whinnying in a dense forest, leaden trees too close together to slip past the tongue

For self-defense

Psyche: My search for reasons the gods invaded my life began for real after he vanished to heal his wound.

8. THE MORAL AMBIGUITY OF CURIOSITY

Right? Left? Yes, both! Thrice! Across the spectrum, here and not. Chase it?

9. CURIOSITY AND LOGIC

Psyche's glass tower from which she defenestrates breaks into whirling word.
Her curiosity leaps to sleep, tumbles into a wind dance of muted mutterings,
tongue-tied, tone tongs, when sleep seeps through the gateless moon gate.

Though on a more speculative note, curiosity requires immersion and
loss of
control,
requires specters and speculums,
requires the sacrifice of reflection.

10. EXPLORATION AND CURIOSITY

Windowpanes frame blowing glass,
bowing grasses, skeletal ice ghosts
Surging, rolling on your side.
Sand clogging the joints of doors and joinery, eye sockets
Glued tight. Outside the grains of time, outside the time machine
Washing dream, waves wishing away our gains
spitting out sand
You wash up in your hourglass house,
The bell jar du jour

(Blessings are bestowed on Psyche for each of her impossible trials … the most trivial creatures sort out her problems, and she stops asking why.)

The story ends at a wedding fest in which Soul and Desire fuse.
But now they are wounded,
have wandered long in wondering,
are wiser though wrenched.
The soul is less interested in knowing. Knows too much.
Searches for forgetfulness.

The Mystery seeks form, then language to express form, then

transforms.

A low-flying dragon, slash-and-burn cultivation of a young soul.

Father, Ether, Sea

Maud Casey

> *Like all of the hysterics from the* belle époque*, she seemed to deny her past, and when questioned about the slightest detail from that part of her life, she responded with a refusal tinged with anger.*
>
> —"Quelques souvenirs de la Salpêtrière"
> A. Baudouin, *Paris Médical* 21 (1925)

When the hunger comes, bread, onions, artichokes, herring—I douse it all with vinegar and stuff my face until I cannot breathe.

I was born to go nowhere, the doctors said. Still, every day, there is a choice and I make it. I go somewhere. What next?

Let me begin again.

When I lost my hand all I wanted was the ether. With amyl nitrite, a burst of kaleidoscopic colors too quickly gone; with chloroform, dreams both pleasant and painful but mostly painful. With ether, agreeable and voluptuous dreams, a brightening, the infinite moving through me. I feel nothing, which isn't nowhere at all. In the days when I was queen, I'd sip from stolen bottles—the doctors often careless, leaving the bottle after they'd applied the cloth. Twelve years after the great doctor's death, the death of the diagnosis, the death of my queendom, and so on and whatnot, no one cares to put me under. Now I work in the radiology lab. I work in it and it has worked in me. Still, for everything sharpened, everything crisped, I look everywhere for the little bottles. When I find them, in that expanding light, something floats up from my past, that great well of surprise. The apple stolen from a basket of fruit and candy a visitor brought to a patient, eaten in a back corner at the Hôpital Temporaire, where I worked years or decades ago as a ward girl. Only slightly bruised, that apple is still the sweetest I've ever tasted.

Today, the new doctor wandering the radiology lab startled me with a question and my father floated up out of that well. There he was, promising, as he forever was, to take us to the sea, by which he meant the Seine, that dirty river. Even the blocks of ice bobbing in it in the winter were dirty. It doesn't count, my brothers and I would say. What exactly were we counting? We'd never seen anything else.

"They say those attacks were simulated," the new doctor whispered to the intern I had recently spurned, as if it were all a secret. The new doctor has a droopy, yearning mustache. A young man but terrible posture, all of him a little wilted. He nodded his head in my direction, curious as the rest. Tucked inside his sentence, questions: *Did you and the great doctor or didn't you? Why did you tear the linens? Why did you break the plates?* And questions he didn't have the imagination to ask: *Do you dream about your missing arm? What is the difference between abandoned and unfortunate? Why did your father throw you out the window?*

Bread, onion, artichoke, herring, vinegar, vinegar, vinegar, vinegar.

Let me begin again.

Was it soon after he lost his job as a carpenter that my father piled my brothers and me on a train to the sea? He'd found piecemeal work with a milliner who wanted him to go to Dunkirk to visit a business on his behalf in Saint-Omer, where he hoped to sell some of his hats on consignment. Maybe my father knew an engineer who snuck us into a compartment? That day felt, it feels, like the beginning of everything, not the end. Surely my mother could not have given up a day of work, particularly since my father had been for a while between jobs. I wish I could come, she said, but why would she wish that? She was glad to be rid of us for a few days. Maybe, even fleetingly, she wished us gone for good because when we wish these things how can we ever know it might actually come true?

We lived next to one of the largest metalworking factories in Paris, outside of which were piles of thick iron sheets, waiting always to be moved. In the winter, my brothers and I watched as men chipped ice from them. Next door to the factory was the ironworks with a puddling furnace where my brothers would eventually work, loading pig iron into a wheelbarrow, heaving it into the furnace, removing the slag. One day, not

long after he took us to the sea, my father wandered in. Someone pulled the chain to the weight that opened the scorching furnace door, and he tried to crawl inside. The men working the furnace pulled him back. Only his pants caught fire, which disappointed him greatly. The delirium lasted weeks. It landed him in bed #40 of the Saint Charles Ward, where a nun gave my mother a vial containing six drops of some mysterious thing. After that, he was carted off to an asylum never to be heard from again.

"They say you were only making fools of them," the droopy, yearning doctor said again as if my lost hand meant I was deaf too. He sidled up gently, not understanding it was never gentleness that brought me around in the amphitheater. Bright lights, strips of magnesium, whistles. There was an enormous gong. Bang that, I'm yours.

"The doctors?" he added, as if my silence meant confusion.

He wanted the truth, as if it were a bottle of camphor or a bone. I kept my eyes on my work. I said nothing and he said nothing more, perched on the edge of his imagination where I was on my knees. Who among us hasn't been? His eyes threw heat, not altogether unpleasant.

"One of those hysterics who has had her moment of fame," said the spurned intern, who is never not watching. After I wouldn't let him maneuver me into the closet a second time, he would have liked to perform the amputation himself. Women have their fragility but men are so easily wounded. He had rough, unspecific hands. I only had the burns then. That was when I first began working in the radiology lab. I hadn't yet lost a single finger.

"This is not the amphitheater," I said, gesturing with my stump. It usually scared him off. There was a time I would have said oh leave me alone, every night I am put under I no longer know what I'm doing or what I've become but that was a long time ago, when I would lie down in the courtyard for hours and refuse to get up.

"She's better since she lost the hand," the intern says, not as though he wants me to hear, as though I'm not here at all.

"I'm missing a hand," I said. "I'm not deaf."

"Dead, not deaf," the intern said. Subtle he is not. Still, there are days when I would rather be as lost as my hand and the era when I was queen.

All of it vanished—where did it go?

That's when the droopy, yearning doctor startled me. "What comforts you?" he asked. His curiosity was a door opening. The intern took him by the arm, steered him elsewhere in the lab. "What are you on about?" the intern asked him. "Don't get mixed up in that." His own curiosity so often swerved into meanness. Still, the new doctor's question lingered. It lingers. I misinterpreted his mustache. Yearning? Maybe, but not drooping, not wilted.

Let me begin again.

From Paris to Dunkirk, did my father tell us stories as the train heaved in and out of stations on its way to the sea? After he climbed into the furnace, my brothers said everything he told us wasn't true but what is life if not the lies we tell about it? Truth is not camphor or a bone. The stories we tell, adjacent at best. Even the moon is a liar; it appears to be waxing when it is waning, waning when it is waxing. When I was a plastic mass of flesh and bones molded at the will of the doctors, a soft wax figure—the queen!—on to which the most fantastic emotions could be imprinted, truth seemed beside the point. They said we had an essentially perverse nature, that we sought to fool those around us in the same way our impulse was to steal, falsely accuse, set things on fire. We had a need to lie for no reason and to no end. They said this as if it were some great discovery, as if it had nothing to do with them. They had never lied out of desperation, or just because they could? They hypnotized us and told us ammonia was rose water, charcoal was chocolate, a top hat was a baby to be cradled. Who among us hasn't tried to wring a little fun out of the struggle?

Let me begin again.

The hospital has always been a museum full of dead things. Anatomical drawings. A cabinet full of skulls. Spinal columns. Entire skeletons. When the great doctor died, he became one of the dead things. Still, there he is, hanging on the wall in the painting by André Brouillet, nine by thirteen feet, *the greatest success of the Salon of 1887*, according to a review in *The Temp*. A million sets of eyes came to the Palais de l'Industrie to see *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière*. Twenty-seven men (doctors, philosophers, two novelists, an art critic who was also a collector, the artist

himself) and two nurses, larger than life-sized, gather around a swooning woman with spectacular bosoms, a woman who is me. By the time the painting was finished, I'd been there ten years, the Marie I was when I arrived painted over, and there was Blanche, all swoon and fiery revelation. My face says *tragedy*, *mystery*; my clenched fist, the contracture—that long-gone hand, as alive as the long-gone great doctor—says *hysteria*. How odd to see the shape someone makes of you when a whole life of days can go by, a hunger with no shape at all. The gap between how we are measured and how we feel—isn't that called life?

The painting, born from a desire to look; in it, I look. The eyes on the back of my head look onto one of those endless Parisian rains that double blur the days. The slick courtyard stones, damp and cold as the stone floor of the church where my mother sent me for confession as a girl. "What next?" the priest asked. "What next, my child?" Inattention to prayers, the sin of gluttony, no end to what next. "What next?" In the painting, the doctor cradling my swoon, does he feel my child's heart racing ahead of itself, racing up ahead years later to what next? I was an imaginative child but never could I have imagined my way into that painted swoon. My searching child's heart, like my father's when he was a boy, raced ahead, curious about its future. One day, not able to read a sign on the door, he walked into a random home to beg a scrap of bread. The home turned out to be the office of the mayor, who walked him directly to the jail for violating the local ordinance against begging. There wasn't one against not being able to read.

What next? What next? Ticking inside me, a hunger clock. Bread, onions, artichokes, herring, vinegar, vinegar, vinegar, vinegar.

Let me begin again.

"My father, I loved him more than anyone else in the world," my father told us as if we were not his children but strangers he met on that train. His father was a miller. His mother died when he was a baby. That he was ever a baby, that seemed strange enough; that he grew from a baby into a boy stranger still. We listened, his life rushing by us like the world outside the train windows. One day, he was that boy and he was leaving school. He saw people running, his uncle among them. There must be something

extraordinary! What could it be? He was thrilled by the possibilities, that wide-open feeling of anything, anything one has before it becomes clear that anything, anything contains every possible thing from delight to wreckage. He would find his father. His father would tell him what it was. Up ahead, his uncle fell to the ground. When he saw how badly the mill had been damaged, he fainted rather than see more. The windmill was not turning. A lightning bolt struck one of the vanes and it broke apart, trapping my father's father underneath. People led my father away and he never saw his father again. You are abandoned, his aunt said, you must come live with us now. "What are you saying?" his uncle shouted. He isn't abandoned, he insisted, only unfortunate. "This distinction," my father said to me and my brothers, "it is everything. I am not abandoned, only unfortunate."

"You are not abandoned, only unfortunate," he said when he gathered me up after he threw me out the window. Whenever he said it, he was telling our future, mine and my brothers. He was telling us how to live after he was gone, which would be sooner than any of us thought.

Let me begin again.

What next? My curious heart races ahead.

The placid and delectable Alsatian, that's what they called me when I arrived at the hospital twenty-eight years ago. Placid? I could put it on. Delectable? Perhaps. But Alsatian? I was born in Paris but it did not fit their story made not of camphor, not of bone, these doctors, these emperors of anecdote. The queen of gongs and tremors and tuning forks began in the City of Light. When the lights sharpen to the point of sound, take me to the city of shadows. Bread, onions, herring, artichoke, vinegar, vinegar, vinegar, vinegar.

The first thing they wrote when I arrived was: She is tall (five feet three inches) and corpulent (154 pounds). She is blonde and has a lymphatic complexion. Her skin is white and freckled. Her breasts are very large. There is a scar on the upper outside of her left thigh.

The first thing I did when I arrived was leave. Eighteen years old, I snuck out of the hospital. I was gone for hours but I never left the Grands Boulevards. Where would I have gone? Those first nights in the hospital, I was not yet Blanche, only Marie. I cried out in my sleep, "Blanche!

Blanche! Come quick!" This is what they told me. This was before the ether; still, I have no memory of those nights. Was Blanche a dead sister? they wondered. I thought, well, somewhere there's a dead sister named Blanche, but she's not mine. I have two brothers who might be dead, but I did not tell them that. I love the name Blanche. It's always made me think: bosoms. Even now I have spectacular bosoms. I became Blanche and then I became the queen. Throughout Europe, the doctor became great but I was the queen and even he, in all his greatness, understood the queen was greater.

From here to there, the great doctor traced my story, a story he made out of things I remembered, or dreamed, or things I dreamed I remembered. He traced the line from there to here. Camphor! Bone! The seizures and convulsions that left me partially deaf and mute as a child. Apprenticed to a furrier at the age of twelve. In that house, I dropped everything I tried to hold. The furrier's wife, believing I was doing it on purpose, made me pay for the things I broke. By the end, I was in *their* debt. Two years later, the furrier attacked me. I ran all the way home to my mother, who allowed me to work with her—she was a laundress—by the Seine. The mariners and dockers mistook us for prostitutes despite the heavy loads of wet clothing we carried. Every day, they followed us home until the day my mother couldn't get out of bed. Of the first weeks after she died, the only thing I remember is dark rooms. Soon after, my two brothers were placed in foster homes and I went back to the furrier. I'd lost my virginity by then to a boy I liked who worked for a jeweler. He had deliberate hands, specific fingers. Eight months after I started working again for the furrier, I woke up with the shakes and broke every plate in the house. When I ran away, a nun from the convent on the rue du Cherche-Midi took me in. I think I would have made a good nun though I would never have become bosomy Blanche. I'd still be dusty old Marie. Two months later I had a fit in the laundry room and tore all the linens. It was then I came to the Salpêtrière, hired first as a ward girl, a few days later admitted to the noninsane epileptic ward.

The doctors assumed my father was one of the men down by the Seine who followed my mother home. The curiosity of those men, like that of the

intern, often swerved into cruelty. I kept some things to myself. I keep some things from myself.

Let me begin again.

There are endless photographs of us in this museum of dead things. Before I worked in the radiology lab, I worked briefly as an assistant in the photography lab. “Catalepsy: Provoked Pose,” the photograph is called. There it is again, my lost hand, not lost at all. There were days I needed the bright light, the incandescent strip, the whistle, the gong; then there were days it came unbidden. I came unbidden. In the photograph, my left arm is raised. There it is again, my long-gone hand not gone at all (camphor! bone!) but double blurred like Paris rain out a painted window. The great doctor said I was a kind of statue and it is true, I could be when the doctors were especially forgetful. A half bottle, I could hold a position for hours. They raised my arms above my head like a ballerina but the way my head is turned, gazing up at my hand, that was my decision. The curve of my hand reminded me of a wax doll the woman who ran the laundry where my mother worked once gave me. A ballerina with beautiful hands tiny and perfect. A fine vein like the stripped branch of a tree in winter reaches up the inside of my wrist. How to describe the feeling of being only body? That ether feeling of nothingness that wasn’t nothing. I always had beautiful hands. My fingers, long and lovely. The cup of my own palm holds my gaze, it holds me there, in its world. The amphitheater, the hospital, the city, the country—there is infinite, glorious space. My mother, my father, my brothers are there, still. There it is, the world, not lost at all. Though maybe it’s true what they said about me. What they say still. I am in pieces.

When the train arrived at the port on the North Sea in Dunkirk, did we go to the shipyards? Did my brothers and my father strike up a conversation with some of the men working the docks? Did they talk the way certain men talk about things they are encountering for the first time, conjuring solid facts? The size and shape and seaworthiness of those ships—the words they found to tether the things they saw would have fascinated me. I stuck around a while thinking I might learn something, but then the jetty called to me. I walked out onto it. There, way out on the horizon, a boat. For hours, the boat moved across that water, so slowly it seemed not to

move at all. The sea surrounding it, a glittering vision of the infinite. When I broke every plate in the house of the furrier, the sound glittered. Plates and plates and plates, the glittering crashed through me. The light on the sea shimmered inside of me where I stood on the jetty, tidal. The tides had something to do with that lying moon, my father or my brothers or one of the men by the docks said. I felt myself a part of the moon and the waves. This body wasn't a problem.

"What comforts you?" the new doctor asked. What did he really want to know?

Sometimes the doctors put me to sleep and subject me to certain influences. I forgot who I was, my age, my sex, my nationality. I forgot where I was and when. I lost the idea of my late existence. Even still, I was not abandoned, only unfortunate. I was not abandoned, only unfortunate. That boat was in no hurry to get anywhere at all. Where was it going? It moves still, across the infinite, and everyone still and always here.

I appear to be waxing when I am waning, waning when I'm waxing. My father never took us to the sea, only the Seine, that dirty river. Who cares?

I want to ask my father, who left this earth long ago, why is unfortunate better than abandoned? Sometimes, I stuff my mouth with vinegar-doused bread, onions, artichokes, herring, and try to forget the question; sometimes, I find the bottles, turn my insides to silk, and the question no longer matters. What question?

It's funny the details that make up a life. Born to go nowhere? No one can see the shape of a life until it's over. The great doctor traced a story with the stories I gave him, from here to there, but then he died and my life was not over yet, no *there* yet. I won't be here for *there*. I'll never know if it was nowhere I was born to go. There is only beginning and beginning. And, so.

Let me, oh let me, begin again.

There's the story of your life and then there are the parts no one can ever know. Not even you.

The Empyrean Light

Gregory Norman Bossert

Something was lying in the street. Ms. Wronski thought she saw it move, but by the time she had juggled her way up the stairs with her keys and the bag with the milk and the crumple of supermarket flyers and her satchel of ungraded homework, she was no longer certain. Curious, she peered down at it through the brittle curtains. Between the steep angle and the dim light of the street lamp, all Ms. Wronski could make out was a featureless black lump of undecided shape or size. As she watched, it moved, slowly up like a hand raised in hesitant recognition, then uncertainly down again. She stepped back from the window with a vague sense of embarrassment, and went to put the kettle on.

"It's a bag, one of those green trash bags for the leaves," she said to the teapot.

But this explanation didn't sit well in Ms. Wronski's stomach; something about the motion she'd seen was too deliberate to be the wind, more like the pouring of the milk than the way it swirled afterward in her cup. An image came to her, so vivid and visceral that she spilled her tea, of an infant escaped from one of the houses that lined the other side of the street, its little hands and knees bruised and filthy from the asphalt.

She leapt up and out, her stocking feet slipping on the stairs, stopping only to wedge open the building's outer door with the brass ashtray that stood guard there, as she'd left her keys in her apartment. Even before she reached the curb she could see that the shape was not a child, thank goodness; it was too small, too angular, too sight-confoundingly black. But what it *was* was not clear until she, walking more slowly now with the pavement under her soles still warm from the faded day, was right upon it.

It was a crow. It lay on its right side, head facing the far sidewalk and legs straight out as if it had simply toppled over. Seen up close, the black of

its feathers shed the twilight in a thin, prismatic wash. No visible damage, no tire tread or cat slash, no mar or twist of disease. Its eye was a hole into the dark.

As Ms. Wronski stood there, hands on knees, the crow's left wing slowly rose to point at the sky, and then down. The motion had the steady deliberation of clockwork, or of a bloom unfolding.

"A nervous reflex," Ms. Wronski said.

She was answered by a low, guttural rattle. Standing on the curb was a second crow. It shuffled its feet on the concrete, looked down at the crow in the road, then up at her. It made the rattling sound again, followed by a "tsk tsk tsk."

"Oh dear," Ms. Wronski said.

She looked around. The street, which was never busy, was deserted. A few windows flickered with TV light. The elms were black against the glass-green sky. The yellowing leaves of the maple that had toppled a few days ago in front of Mr. Gamitter's house trembled in the breeze.

"Tsk tsk tsk," went the crow on the curb.

"Oh dear," Ms. Wronski said again. She'd read that crows mated for life. Or was one crow or the other a fledgling, still dependent despite its full midsummer growth? Ms. Wronski flashed on her early vision of a stranded infant, and shuddered, though the breeze was warm.

The crow in the road's wing rose and fell.

There was a twig in the gutter, debris from the toppled maple. Ms. Wronski picked it up and, with an apologetic grimace at the watching crow, poked the fallen one. There was no reaction.

She looked up at the crow on the curb. "It's gone, dear," she said to it. "I'm sorry." The crow lowered its head with what seemed like patience.

Ms. Wronski imagined it keeping vigil through the night, through the morning's cars and bikes and children chasing the rumble of the school bus, through the inevitable crushing and the heat and the flies. She sighed.

For all its pristine, shimmering feathers, Ms. Wronski could not bring herself to pick up the fallen crow in her bare hands, for fear of disease—do we have West Nile fever here? she wondered—and for the simple strangeness of such intimacy with something wild. Her twig was too thin to

lift the body, and the scattered maple leaves too small. “I’ll be just a minute,” Ms. Wronski said, to one or another of the crows. She shuffled across the street and up the walk, stopping in the door to the apartment building to tug loose a bit of leaf that had stuck to the sole of her stockings.

She didn’t want to part with the rubber gloves she used for cleaning; they’d just reached the perfect softness, and anyway they smelled strongly of bleach, which seemed disrespectful of the crow’s nature. She thought of using the supermarket flyers, but then with sudden inspiration searched the kitchen drawers until she found the oven mitt her fourth graders had given her a few years back. It was shaped like a bear, with a flap for the jaw.

She brought her shoes, this time, and her keys. The two crows were still there, the one in the road and the other on the curb. Apart from them, and the litter of Mr. Gamitter’s toppled maple, the street was still empty. The crow’s wing rose and fell, as if to welcome her back.

Ms. Wronski slipped the oven mitt on her hand, and worked the jaw a few times with her thumb.

“This isn’t a real bear,” she said to the watching crow, and then felt foolish. “Well, I’m sure you know much more about animals than I do.”

She carefully picked the fallen crow up from the asphalt and set it on the curb by the other.

“Now then, dear, say your goodbyes.” She stepped back and clasped her hands, startled herself as the bear’s jaws closed over her fingers, surreptitiously wiped those fingers on her skirt as she looked away down the street. Still no sign of car or pedestrian, no attendant birds or cat revisiting the scene of the crime, just the occasional TV flicker and, briefly, a shape that might have been Mr. Gamitter at his window.

She looked down. The standing crow was looking back up at her. It didn’t *seem* particularly mournful, Ms. Wronski thought, just patient, or perhaps a better word was expectant.

“Of course, you crows are familiar with death,” she said. “The circle of life and all. It’s a matter of the proper *perspective*.”

The fallen crow’s wing rose and fell, as if in acknowledgment. The watching crow watched Ms. Wronski.

“Well, then, here we go.” Ms. Wronski picked up the fallen crow and, with a check of the street—still empty—and Mr. Gamitter’s window—likewise empty—she walked, solemnly and with the crow held before her, across the street and up the walk to the door of the apartment building, then left and around the corner to where the bins sat.

She opened the lid of the trash bin with her free hand. A stench swirled out, so thick it was visible in the light from the street lamp: pizza and Chinese food and coffee grounds and used diapers and stale beer and the unnatural tang of Pine-Sol cleaner. Ms. Wronski winced and turned her head to catch a breath, saw that the other crow had moved to the walkway, still watching.

Ms. Wronski blew the breath back out, and lowered the lid. She bit her lip, and looked at the other bins. Recycling seemed too far a stretch, circle of life or not, and the rules of what could be recycled were very thorough. But the next bin was labeled “Yard Waste.”

“You might not be quite what they had in mind,” Ms. Wronski said to the crow in her hand, “but you certainly spend most of your time in the yard, and I am sure you are biodegradable.” She looked over her shoulder, somewhat guiltily. Mr. Gamitter’s house was just across a low fence from the bins. It occurred to her that Mr. Gamitter also spent most of his time in the yard, and was likewise biodegradable. She swallowed the sudden urge to giggle. “We won’t toss *him* in the bin just yet,” she whispered to the crow. “No matter how distraught he was about the maple tree crushing his roses.”

The yard-waste bin was larger than the others, a steel box on wheels that was picked up and dumped by a special truck once a week. Ms. Wronski stood on her tiptoes and pushed up the lid. It smelled encouragingly of grass and wood chips. She hooked the arm that held the crow over the edge and levered herself up. Inside, the bin was dark, and as her eyes adjusted she could see that it was entirely empty. She opened the pot holder’s felt-toothed jaw. In the dark of the bin, the crow’s shimmer was lost; it was a black, featureless form, as it had been when she first glimpsed it in the street. It was surprisingly heavy lying in her pot-holdered palm at the end of her extended arm; she always imagined all birds as feather light, but the

crow felt like a bag of apples, or a pint of milk. She imagined how it would drop from her hand, not flying but falling, to land with a thud and the low bell thrum of the bin's steel floor, to lie on that bare steel floor in the dark until the truck came.

She closed the bear's jaws again around the crow, slid her feet back down flat, and closed the lid.

"For goodness' sake, Eli, get a grip," she said to herself.

She walked back around the corner to the front door. The other crow hopped back a few steps and looked up at her. "Tsk tsk tsk," it said.

"Indeed. If I've taken on the responsibility, I might as well do a proper job," Ms. Wronski said to it. "I'll just be a few minutes."

She unlocked the building door, a bit awkward with her right hand since the crow was in her left, went up the stairs, and unlocked her own door. She spread the supermarket flyers on the coffee table and set the crow down, set the bear pot holder next to it, fetched her abandoned tea, and sat herself on the love seat.

The crow looked utterly alien, there among the school papers and knickknacks and stacks of books. The gleam of its feathers; the dark of its eye; the smooth, reversing curve from beak to neck to back; its perfect stillness; all made the apartment look tawdry and transient.

The crow's wing rose and fell. If Ms. Wronski hadn't finished her tea she would have spilled it again. She got up, put the cup into the sink, stood by the fridge with her hands on her hips, and frowned at the crow. It looked no less alien from the vantage of the kitchenette. Then she carried the kitchen stool into the bedroom and stood on it to rummage through the top shelf of her closet until she found the box that held the black patent pumps that she'd just worn the once and had thought to return, but hadn't. She took out the pumps and set them on the floor with her other shoes. The shoebox no longer had its tissue paper, but the green scarf with the floral pattern that she sometimes used to wrap her hair on blustery spring days was hanging there in the closet.

As she came back to the front room, Ms. Wronski heard a throaty rattle. She leaned over the crow on the coffee table, but it was still silent. The rattle came again, from the window. She pulled aside the curtains and there,

balanced on the narrow ledge outside the window, was the other crow. It peered past her at the table, then tilted its eye toward her.

Ms. Wronski pondered for a moment, then shrugged. “In for a penny,” she said, and opened the window.

The crow shuffled forward a bit onto the flat of the window ledge, but did not enter.

“You’re welcome to come in,” Ms. Wronski said, and then wondered if, vampire-like, it was now free to come and go as it pleased in the future. Though, of course, “the future” might not be long for a crow, as the bird on the table attested.

The crow on the ledge just blinked, and preened a feather flat.

“Suit yourself,” Ms. Wronski said. “Though if *I* had stayed at my window when I first saw your friend in the street, I would never have figured what was going on. As I said, it’s a matter of perspective.”

The crow in the window tilted its head with a dubious look she would have found a bit cheeky in one her students.

“Well, then. My name is Ms. Wronksi.” She underscored the “z” in “Ms.” like she did with her students, though they invariably said “Mizzuz,” and that oaf of an assistant principal always insisted on “Miss” with a drawn-out “s” and a disdainful leer. “But then again, he complains about the ‘puh-suede-o intellectuals, so I pay him no mind at all,” she said.

Back on the love seat, she shook out the scarf, folded it triple—the nylon was quite sheer—and lined the shoebox with it. “It will be just like sleeping in a lovely meadow,” she said to the crow on the table. Then she put the bear back on, and picked up the crow.

“If you’re not really dead, now would be the time to let me know,” she said. The crow’s wing was still, its legs stiff, its eye focused on nothing but the darkness within.

Ms. Wronski set the crow in the box, and tucked the ends of the scarf over the crow as tightly as she could, thinking of that wing rising again. Then she fit the box’s lid on, took the bear off, and stood. She turned to the window, but the other crow was gone.

Mr. Gamitter was at his window as she came out the door to the apartment building, hands on the glass, staring down at his fallen tree, but

there was no sign of him when she reached the fence to his yard. The other crow was there, however, perched on the maple's upturned roots.

"Tsk tsk tsk," she said to it. It ruffled up its feathers, and shook them smooth again.

The maple in Mr. Gamitter's yard had fallen, for no reason Mr. Gamitter had been able to discern, last Sunday night. And when it fell, crushing Mr. Gamitter's roses and a section of fence, it had left a circle of upturned dirt where the roots had been. Ms. Wronski set the shoebox in the center of the circle. Then, after another check of Mr. Gamitter's window, she fetched the shovel he had left leaning against the house, and dug a neat rectangular hole adjacent to the box. She leaned the shovel against the inverted roots of the maple, which waggled their torn ends at her in the breeze like disapproving fingers.

"Well, it's not your dirt anymore, is it?" Ms. Wronski said to the roots. "There's no space in front of my building, and I'm sure Mr. Gamitter would rather not find *another* hole in his lawn."

She knelt, and lowered the box into the hole. Then she stood and brushed the soil from her skirt. The watching crow jumped down by the little grave; Ms. Wronski could not tell if it was looking up at her or down at the shoebox. In the last light of the sky and the dim glow from Mr. Gamitter's window, the box glared, glossy green-striped white cardboard stamped with the logo of the manufacturer. The light that bounced from it to the surrounding soil was the flat sheen of the TV flicker. Nothing at all about it looked natural.

The shoebox lid slowly rose, and slid to the side. The ends of the scarf fell open. The black arrow of the buried crow's wing pointed up at Ms. Wronski.

The watching crow opened its beak.

"Oh, hush," Ms. Wronski said, in her best schoolteacher tone. "You're very quick with your 'tsk tsk tsk' but I just don't know what you want me to do with your mate, or your child, or your friend, or whatever she is." Her voice trembled a bit with what might have been frustration.

The buried crow's wing fell again. The watching crow closed its beak. The lozenge shape of Mr. Gamitter came and went in his window. Ms.

Wronski pondered.

After a while, during which the buried crow's wing rose and fell, and rose and fell again, Ms. Wronski dusted off her hands and squatted down next to the watching crow, who blinked but did not move away. "Perhaps," she said to it, "my mistake is in thinking you want me to do anything at all."

The watching crow ruffled its feathers and rattled at that.

"OK, OK. Let's just start over then."

Ms. Wronski lifted the box from the hole and carried it over the crushed fence and down the walk and across the street, to where she had first found the fallen crow. She couldn't bear to put it back in the road, so she carefully tipped it out onto the curb. She sat next to it, and the watching crow fluttered down on the far side. The leaves of Mr. Gamitter's maple shifted and shuddered in the breeze. What was left of the evening sky, the scattered street lamps, and TVs, and the glow from Mr. Gamitter's window had all merged into one light.

"Well now," Ms. Wronski said. "I couldn't see you clearly from my window. At first, I mean, when I got home, because of the angle and the light. Perhaps I still can't."

She leaned down on one elbow to look at the fallen crow, and then leaned even farther, pillowing her cheek against her palm, and waited. The watching crow made a sound that for all the world sounded like a chuckle. The fallen crow's wing rose up against the sky.

"Up," Ms. Wronski said. And then, "Ah." She sat up again. The wing lowered. Ms. Wronski reached down and gently smoothed it flat with one finger.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said. "I teach fourth- and fifth-grade social studies, and then I come home and have my cup of tea and a sandwich, and sometimes I read and sometimes I do the crossword, and then I go to bed. 'Up' is something I just don't know much about."

The other crow said, "Tsk tsk tsk," and chuckled again.

"And as for you, Ms. Know-It-All Crow, we'll just see—"

Ms. Wronski stopped, and was silent for a moment. Then she nodded.

"In for a pound, Eli," she said, and got up—slowly, because after all the evening's activity her knees were sore—and stepped into the road, where

the crow had fallen. Then she set herself down, first to one knee, and then to her seat, and then on her side, knees drawn up, just as she'd first found the crow.

The rush of blood to her head, the feel of the asphalt against her skin, the effort and strangeness of the evening, the simple wrongness of lying in the road—surely there's a law against it, she thought—left her dizzy. She shut her eyes.

When Ms. Wronski opened her eyes again, she saw two crows looking down at her. Her first thought was that yet a third crow had arrived. But she had spent too much time looking at these two crows not to recognize them both, even *if* the one that she had found fallen now stood on its feet, head cocked to the side to look at her.

The risen crow raised its head and cawed three times—a wild, high sound—and the other joined it in a lower, gritty counterpoint.

A pause then. Ms. Wronski held her breath.

The two crows cawed again, and from the distance came an answer, and another, and another, until the evening rang with the sound. Still calling, the two crows leapt into the air. One of them—Ms. Wronski thought it was the one who had stood and watched—looped around to pass just overhead, its wing tip brushing her hair, and then the two flung themselves into the sky. Two more crows flew up from behind Mr. Gamitter's house, and three from the roof of her apartment building, and then dozens, hundreds, thousands, filling that empyrean light with their shimmering dark.

Every crow in the city. Ms. Wronski was sure of it. Every crow in the world.

Ms. Wronski felt as if she were sinking into the asphalt; she thought that even if she had wanted to rise, she would not be able. She lifted her arm instead. Was it to beckon the crows back, or shoo them on their way?

"A wave farewell," Ms. Wronski said, and lowered her arm.

She could turn her head a bit, to look up into the crow-darkened sky. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mr. Gamitter, standing on his lawn, looking not up at the departing crows, but at the fallen maple.

She was losing the light, and the angle was poor, but Ms. Wronski could just make out Mr. Gamitter setting himself down, a sort of slow toppling,

into the circle of dirt where the maple had stood. The leaves of the maple began spiraling loose from the branches. All down the street, the trees strained upward against the pavement; some slipped loose and began to rise.

Coyotes

Stephen O'Connor

A single candle burns on a table in a dark kitchen. Melissa clanks shut the door of a woodstove and watches its triangular vents brighten with a flickering orange. She fills an aluminum kettle with water and places it on the scuffed iron lid directly over the fire. She waits. She touches her forehead to the cold glass of the kitchen window and looks out at a field where cattle are discernible only as faint smudges in a slate-blue dimness. A cow lows. Birds call across great distances.

Melissa is thirty-eight. She is wearing cutoffs and a T-shirt. Her feet are bare and her eyes—black in this light, but normally a dog brown—are downturned at their outer corners, and so can make her look forlorn, even when she is entirely content.

The kettle has just begun to hiss when she hears a new sound: whispery—perhaps a mouse.

A woman's voice: "Oh, sorry."

Harriet is standing beside the stove, completely naked. "I didn't know you were here," she says.

Melissa makes a small, surprised noise.

Harriet smiles. "I'm always the first one up." Her smile is not friendly.

Melissa does not want to look at Harriet's Brazil-waxed crotch, her walleyed breasts, her belly like a couch pillow left out in the rain.

Harriet is Spencer's big sister. She lives in this house.

"I made a fire," Melissa says. She points to the kettle: "For tea."

Harriet lifts the kettle, sways it, sets it down. "Thanks." Her smile alters.

Outside the window a crow caws.

No longer smiling, Harriet absently scratches the inside of her thigh.

"I'll be right back." She leaves the room.

When Harriet's footsteps are no longer audible, Melissa takes the kettle off the stove and goes back upstairs. It is 5:30 a.m. She doesn't know why she thought she should get up so early.

Melissa and Spencer celebrated the six-month anniversary of their first date at a country inn he had found online: white linen, actual silver, and enormous glasses glinting in candlelight; a canopy bed upstairs. Melissa was in heels and a short black dress.

She had not had a drink in a month, but when Spencer poured wine into her huge glass, she took one sip. Then more. When the glass was empty, she filled it herself.

She laughed. "Doesn't this feel like an *Architectural Digest* photo spread?"

Spencer made a laugh-like grunt and covered his face with his gigantic glass.

"I've never seen so much pseudo–William Morris wallpaper in my life!" she said. "And so many sepia-toned photographs!"

Spencer looked around and shrugged. "I guess it is a bit overdone. Or—I don't know: sentimental."

"That's not what I said."

Spencer took another sip of wine. Then he smiled. "Is this our first fight?"

"It's not a fight."

"Oh, good."

"It's a discussion."

"Oh, good." He looked over her shoulder. His smile had become the smile of someone trying not to worry.

She drank. She looked away. She looked back. "That word doesn't mean anything."

"What word?"

"Sentimental." She looked into his eyes and held his gaze. "What does it mean?"

"Well … ," he said, "… I don't know: Cheesy? Sappy? Phony—"

"That's *exactly* what I mean." She set her glass down with a thump. "If you feel something, *that's* what you are feeling. How can it be phony?"

The table hummed.

Beside Spencer's plate, his black cell-phone screen went blue.

After an interval, he returned from the parking lot and sat back down, eyes and mouth shocked zeros. He had to swallow several times before he could tell Melissa what had happened.

"Would it be better if I went back to Boston?" she asked. Then she said, "I'm sorry." She took hold of his cold, moist hand. "I don't know why I said that. Of course, I'll come. I *want* to come. If you need me, I want to be there."

Two hours of green signs with reflective lettering. Trees shooting southward through the headlights' brown fringe. Then white hospital light.

Near 3:00 a.m., Spencer sat on the edge of a bed in a room full of boxes. His elbows were on his knees, his forehead resting on the heels of his hands, his face a collection of golden planes and black voids in the light of three candles stuck by their melted bottoms to a dinner plate.

Melissa put her hand on that muscular place between his shoulder blades, feeling heat beneath her palm, a mist of perspiration.

"Oh, sweetie," she said in a voiced whisper.

He lowered one hand and looked over at her. "I've got to sleep. I can't do anything if I don't get some sleep."

He took three Ambiens; she took one. They undressed, pulled the covers up to their chins. The scent of mildew settled over their faces like a sour fog. Within minutes Spencer was snoring. Melissa practiced her yoga breathing and listened to the electric yips and elastic wails of coyotes, first at one end of the valley, then at the other. After two and a half hours of anxious semihallucinations, she gave up on sleep and rummaged through her suitcase until she found a T-shirt and shorts. She made her way downstairs by phone light.

In the blue dimness of the kitchen, she turned off her phone because the house's electricity had gone out and no one knew when it would be restored. She lit a fire in the woodstove. She clanked the door shut.

Now she is in bed again, lying flat on her back, hands resting one inside the other atop her breastbone—the position of a body in a coffin.

She closes her eyes against the oranging glow behind the diaphanous window curtains and is awoken sometime later by a dream in which she is holding a baby against her breast, except maybe it isn't a baby: it's a cat, or a large rodent with wincing, rheumy eyes. It sinks its teeth into her flesh.

Melissa is sitting cross-legged on a bench-like porch swing, looking out at some dozen cows scattered across a sunlit field. She cradles a cup of tea atop her right ankle. Clumps of orange and yellow dapple the trees surrounding the field. The cows munch. They lift their heads, rake their hooves through the lumpy grass, then munch again. They grunt and low.

No one else is awake. The house at her back is entirely silent, except for an occasional snap as the gathering heat filters unevenly though floorboards and beams. She imagines Spencer's sad face. She imagines sitting beside him on the bed upstairs. He is naked; she is clothed. She holds both of his hands, and talks. His face grows sadder and sadder. She hugs him and feels his sadness—a warm, beautiful pain—flooding from his heart into hers, then filling her whole body.

It is true, she tells herself. I *do* feel his sadness. I love Spencer. I *love* him. I love him so much.

In the corner of each eye she feels that sharp, almost erotic ache that commonly precedes tears. But no tears come.

What she is imagining is telling Spencer that she cannot stay. That she has to leave.

When Spencer pulled up in front of the hospital, Melissa said, "Just go. I'll park." He ran into the emergency room, she slid into the driver's seat, then steered through teepees of gray light descending from spindly lampposts. She strode through the dark spaces between silent cars, her stiff legs limbering with every step, the cool night air filtering up under her short black dress, her heels on the macadam going *tock*, *tock*, *tock*—a sound she normally liked, but that embarrassed her now.

Spencer wasn't in the waiting room, and the triage nurse wouldn't tell her where he was, even when she said he would most likely be with his mother. "Her name is Millicent Galeano," Melissa added, hoping this would be enough to establish her family connection.

The nurse nodded through her plexiglass window at the room behind Melissa's back. "Take a seat. He'll come get you when he's through."

Across the aisle from Melissa, a mother kept patting the hand of her teenaged daughter, whose skin was the color of wet plaster. Down at the end of the aisle, under a muted television, a cluster of gaunt, yellowish men and bulky, red-cheeked women, who might all have been siblings, laughed and traded one-liners as if they were gathered around a table in a bar.

With every passing minute, Melissa felt more absurd in her skimpy dress and huge heels. Arctic air was blowing down on her from circular vents overhead and there were goose bumps on her legs. She had to keep her arms folded across her chest.

Ten minutes became twenty became thirty. Almost as soon as she had sat down she composed a text, "They won't let me inside. I'm in the waiting room," but she never sent it because she didn't want to pester Spencer. Finally, she deleted the text, typed, "Hope everything's OK," and hit *Send*.

Spencer didn't respond, but not long afterward he stepped through the door beside the triage nurse's window, moving as though his limbs were made of stone and his gaze was too heavy to lift from the floor. Melissa threw her arms around him. She led him outside into the night air (which now felt warm) to a bench inside a bus shelter. Mosquitoes hummed invisibly in the dark and made their tiny stings.

"We were too late," he said. "She might even have been dead when Harriet texted."

This is what Melissa knew: not long before she met Spencer, his mother had a stroke that left her weak on one side and introduced long silences into her speech. Harriet moved back to the farm to do her mother's cooking, shopping, and laundry, and to help her take care of the cows. Once upon a time Harriet had been "the family genius" (Spencer's words). She had a BA in physics and an MA in astrophysics, both from Cornell. But then a bad breakup led to a drinking problem (or perhaps it was the other way around),

and for nineteen years she had been a blackout drunk. Now she went to AA every night and worked as a receptionist in a pediatrician's office. She was forty-seven. Never married. No children. Spencer once told Melissa that Harriet had been more of a mother to him than his mother. "She was a rock," Spencer said. During the whole time Melissa had known him, he had only visited the farm once, and when he came home he told her his mother and Harriet fought constantly, screaming until their voices went raw. Spencer called his mother and sister twice a week, but whenever Melissa asked about the calls, he only shook his head and changed the subject. Harriet's text had read: "Mom in hospital. Doc thinks big stroke. Come now."

"What happened?" Melissa said.

"I don't know. She has this black bruise on her cheek. Harriet said she fainted in the shower. Or maybe in the doorway to her bedroom. The story keeps changing. In any event, Harriet didn't call the doctor until Mom was waving one hand in the air and saying things that didn't make sense." He shrugged. Maybe he glanced at Melissa—though in the darkness she couldn't see his eyes. "It was the doctor who said call nine-one-one. I think Mom was still alive when they arrived, but there was nothing anyone—" Spencer stopped talking.

"Oh, sweet love." Melissa put her arm across his shoulder and squeezed. She kissed his temple. "How're you doing?" Her voice was soft, her lips an inch from his cheek.

He shrugged. "I'm in shock. I don't feel anything at all. It's weird." He shrugged again. "I'm supertired, though."

"Of course you are. Poor thing." She pulled his head toward her shoulder, but he resisted. Then he put his hands on his knees as if he was about to stand.

"Should we go back?" she said.

"I think I better. But …" His head turned her way, then back toward the parking lot where all the cars had fog dulling their windshields. "We're just sitting there next to her … I mean she's just lying there in the bed. Her face isn't even covered."

"Oh."

“I don’t know if you’ll want … If that’s something you—” He shrugged.

“If you need me, I want to be there.”

He put his clammy hand on her bare knee. “I don’t know,” he said. “I mean I don’t know what Harriet … I mean …” He squeezed her knee and gave it a shake.

“Anything you want,” she said. And when he didn’t reply, she added, “Is there any other way I can help?”

“Well, they want us to call a funeral home to come take the body, but neither of us knows anything about funeral homes.”

Melissa spent forty-five minutes hunched on the edge of a plastic seat in the waiting room, googling local funeral homes and reading Yelp reviews. When she finally texted Spencer her top two recommendations, he texted back that his mother’s body was gone. A funeral home had come for another body, and the nurse said it was a good place. He still had some forms to sign. He would be out in five minutes.

A white pickup drives along the dirt road between a field and a wooded creek, then crosses a narrow concrete bridge and, with a crunching roar, mounts the eroded driveway to the house. Harriet is behind the wheel, but doesn’t even glance toward Melissa as she passes the porch.

Melissa places her tea mug under the swing and walks barefoot along the flagstone path to the red-dirt yard between the house and barn. As Harriet lurches to a stop beside Spencer’s cobalt-blue Acura, a cloud of pink dust trailing the pickup rolls over its cab and into the woods. Melissa steps off the flagstones and onto sharp gravel embedded in the red clay. She winces and rocks from side to side. Harriet is standing beside the truck, pulling a computer case off the passenger seat.

“Hey,” says Melissa.

Harriet turns around. “Oh, hi.” She slings the computer-case strap over her shoulder and slams the door.

“Need any help?”

Melissa is narrow shouldered and sapling slim. Harriet is shaped like a stack of tires, her arms thicker than Melissa’s legs.

“Sure,” says Harriet. “Thanks.” She unlatches the tailgate, revealing a Styrofoam cooler and two bags of ice. She hands one bag to Melissa, who grips it against her chest. It is sopping with condensation, a solid mass, jagged and very cold.

Harriet says: “I’m hoping these will keep the food from going bad.” She grips the other bag against her hip, slams the tailgate shut, then reaches over the top and grabs the cooler by its red plastic handle. As she turns toward the house, she looks Melissa in the eye and gives her head a rueful shake. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

Melissa gathers that Harriet is expressing incredulity at the bad luck of their having come home last night to find the power out. “Do you know what happened?” Melissa says.

“Yeah. A semi careened off the road and took down two telephone poles.”

Melissa rocks and winces as she follows Harriet across the sharp gravel.

“I saw it on my way into town,” says Harriet. “There are like six repair trucks parked along the road. The guys said the power would be back on this afternoon, but they’re just sitting there, doing nothing. The new telephone poles haven’t even arrived.”

“Jesus.” Now Melissa is walking easily, sometimes on the flagstones, sometimes on the coarse grass. “Unbelievable.”

In the kitchen Harriet puts a layer of ice at the bottom of the cooler, then opens the refrigerator, flings in all of the meat, cheese, and milk, and tells Melissa to cover everything with the remainder of the first ice bag. Harriet puts the second bag onto the refrigerator’s top shelf and closes the door.

“How was your night?” Melissa asks as she covers the cooler.

“What night?” Harriet crumples the dripping plastic ice bag and puts it into the garbage. “I didn’t get one second of sleep.”

She drops into a chair and lets her hands dangle between her legs. There are bags beneath her eyes. Her tangled, pale brown hair is dark with grease near the scalp.

“I’m so sorry,” says Melissa.

Harriet shrugs. Her hands still dangle.

“I didn’t sleep much either,” says Melissa. “The coyotes. Did you hear them? All that yipping gave me chills. I couldn’t sleep.”

“They’re nothing. They never bother humans.”

“That’s good.”

“Well, maybe if there’s a whole pack … I mean—you know: maybe then….” Harriet sighs. She nudges the cooler with the toe of her sneaker, making a fibrous screech. “They ate JJ.” She glances at Melissa. “Mom’s cat. He was scratching at the kitchen door after dinner, so she let him out, even though coyotes had been in the valley for days. An hour later we hear this horrible shriek. That was it. We never saw him again. Mom felt terrible.”

Melissa doesn’t know how to respond to this story.

“Where’s Spencer?” says Harriet.

“Sleeping, I think.”

Harriet shakes her head. She smiles her not-friendly smile. “You better wake him up,” she says. “Tess called while I was in town. They’re going to be here in half an hour. We have a lot of work to do.”

Tess is the sister between Harriet and Spencer. She teaches computer science at Urbana-Champaign. Her husband, Jack, is a yoga teacher. They’ve been driving all night. Fourteen hours.

The small, dark clump on the bedroom floor is Melissa’s short black dress. She puts a glass of ice tea down on a box labeled WINTER CLOTHING, picks up her dress, and drapes it across her open suitcase. Then she picks up the glass and sidles along a row of boxes to sit on a narrow stretch of mattress beside Spencer’s hip. Brilliant sun on the diaphanous curtains infiltrates the room with cloudy light.

Spencer’s head is turned away from her in the manner of a saint struggling with temptation. His muscular chest, with its weathermap swirls of dense black hair, rises and falls. He doesn’t seem to notice when she places her hand at its center. She can feel him breathing and the gentle knocking of his heart. She wonders if he might like to make love—for a brief respite from his grief, perhaps. As her eyes follow the line of his neck muscles from just behind his ear to his collarbone and chest, a sexual

urgency rises through her abdomen, and she wonders if that is selfish. Or perverted.

He winces when she speaks his name. She presses her hand against his chest and gives it a slight shake. "Hey, Spencer," she says softly. "Wakey wakey. I've brought some ice tea." She holds up the glass, which she has been resting on her right knee, but his eyes are still closed.

They twitch, then open—and she can actually see his Ambien grogginess dispersed by the memory that his mother is dead.

His brow wrinkles. He lifts his hand and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, sweet man." She leans over and kisses his forehead. She puts the tea down on a box labeled KITCHEN and tries to slide her hands under his shoulders and give him a hug. He pushes her aside and sits up.

"What time is it?"

She doesn't know because her cell phone is still off. "Around ten. Harriet says that Tess and Jack will be here in half an hour."

"Oh, shit." His hand goes back to the bridge of his nose. He clenches his eyes shut.

"Maybe sooner," Melissa says. "Harriet told me that ten minutes ago. Fifteen."

His hand falls to his lap. He opens his eyes and looks at her.

"Here." She hands him the ice tea.

"Thanks." He takes a deep swallow, lowers the glass, and wipes a dribble off the corner of his mouth with the back of his wrist. His chestnut eyes seem golden in the diffuse light. "The power still out?"

"Yeah. But it's supposed to come on this afternoon."

Spencer looks at her with an expression that she sometimes sees just before he tells her he loves her.

"You OK?" she says.

His chest heaves. His lips form a crumpled arc. "I don't know. I feel like shit."

"At least you got some sleep." She puts her hand on the blanket over his thigh and presses lightly. "You look rested."

He doesn't say anything. His brow warps with a sort of bafflement, which she realizes is the awareness of his mother's death hitting him again.

“You poor love.” She leans close, kisses his temple and then his cheek. Breathing in the fragrant warmth beside his skin, she moves to kiss him on the lips, but he turns his head away.

“There’s so much I have to do.” He taps her thigh with the back of his hand. “I have to get up.”

“Of course.” She leaps from the bed and backs against the labeled boxes. “Sorry.”

Melissa is walking a wooded track beside an open field, the warm sunlight on her arms and legs alternating with cool shade. A pileated woodpecker cackles invisibly amid the tract of oaks and beeches to her left, and a fine dust, puffed up by her flip-flops, coats the skin between her toes. She breathes deeply as she walks. With every exhalation, a veil of tension drifts off her shoulders.

House of death, she thinks. Thank God I’m out of that house of death.

As she walked out the door, Spencer and his two sisters were sitting down at the dining-room table, each carrying a mug of coffee, their expressions sullen and flummoxed. Soon they will have to go to the funeral home, and Melissa will go along—to hold Spencer’s hand, massage his neck, meet his eye with somber but loving gazes.

“You don’t have to,” he told her just before she left.

His eyes reddened and filled with tears.

Hers too.

“Oh no!” she said. “I *want* to be there. I don’t want you to be alone.”

When she hugged him, she felt that she was made entirely out of love.

But now she is free. Now she feels the strength in her legs, the clarity in her mind. Now she smells the sweetness of dried grass, the sinus-filling odors of earth, moss, rotting logs. Birds burble and peep. Squirrels rustle amidst the woods’ anorexic undergrowth. In the brilliant field crickets clink and cicadas make their long, metallic buzzes.

Ahead, the track passes beyond the pasture and enters an emerald tunnel under trees, at the end of which she can see a glimmer of sunlit green that becomes increasingly yellow as she walks and then infused with silver blue. She steps out into a meadow of goldenrod and loosestrife, a gleaming lake

off to her right, its surface faintly rippled and reflecting a pale blue sky crossed by cirrus wisps. There are no houses along the lake—nothing but oaks, beeches, evergreens, and, along the far shore (about a half mile distant), a feathering of beige reeds.

She kicks off her flip-flops and steps into the water. The muddy bottom squishes like cold custard between her toes. There is an icy ring around her ankles, at the border between water and air, but her feet beneath the surface are not uncomfortable.

You should go for a swim, she tells herself. Why not? There's no one to see. She imagines leaving her clothes in a small pile on the grass and swimming out to where the water is bluest, then floating on her back and watching the clouds drift across the sky. You should do it! It would be so beautiful. It would feel so good!

She thinks again about the cold around her ankles, about how chilled she always gets when she swims in a lake.

Do it! she tells herself. Don't be such a coward!

She's tired. So tired. All morning she's been running on adrenaline, but now, suddenly, her legs are heavy. There's a dull pain in her head.

In fact, there isn't time. She needs to hurry back to the house so that she can dress and be ready to escort Spencer to the funeral home. And anyhow, if she actually was to swim out to the lake middle, she'd spend the whole time trying to convince herself that she doesn't mind the cold, that she's having fun, that there's nothing she'd rather do.

Her wet feet on her dusty flip-flops make a film of gritty mud.

The whole way back she regrets her decision. She never does anything just for herself. She's lived her whole life afraid of what other people might think. Where is her courage? Where is her curiosity? What kind of life is that?

Spencer's Acura and Tess and Jack's copper-colored Element are parked in the barnyard, but Harriet's white pickup has vanished. The house is silent except for the click of a venetian blind lifting and falling against a window sash. There is one coffee mug on the dining-room table. Two more in the kitchen sink. Spencer's black pants and white shirt—the clothes he wore to

dinner last night—are missing from the chair beside the bed. His black shoes are also gone.

Melissa flings herself onto the rumpled sheets and buries her face in a pillow. “Goddamn it!” she shouts into the feathery mustiness. “What the fuck am I even doing here!”

She flips onto her back and looks up at the ceiling light: a crimped square of white glass containing hundreds of insect fragments.

She wakes without having had any awareness of being asleep, her mouth coated with bitter paste, her head hot, her thoughts like bubbles rising through mud.

Sitting on the porch swing, staring blankly into varieties of black, yellow, and shimmery green, Melissa feels a presence behind her. She looks around to see a gaunt, enormously tall man watching her silently from behind the screen door. He pushes the door open. “Hi,” he says, then ducks and steps onto the porch. “You Marilyn?”

“Melissa,” she says.

“Jack,” he says.

A few hours earlier, when she was in the bathroom and Spencer was dressing, she heard a low rumble, slamming car doors, hoarse grunts. She looked out the window and saw this very man carrying two black travel bags across the lawn. Even from above she could tell he was huge. He lumbered. He had a storybook giant’s hunched shoulders. But he wasn’t in the kitchen with Harriet and Tess when she and Spencer came downstairs, and he didn’t join the family for a lunch of waterlogged cold cuts and cheese. Nobody said a word about him. And he wasn’t around when Melissa came back from her walk.

“Pleased to meet you,” she says.

“Same here.”

They shake hands. His eyes are smoke blue. His auburn hair is pulled back so tightly from his forehead it looks painted onto his scalp. A lank ponytail dangles halfway down his back. He is at least six six.

“Do you mind?” he asks as he folds his long limbs and sits crosslegged on the porch floor, leaning against the railing. Melissa, also cross-legged,

looks down on him from the swing. She feels as if she is a swami hovering in midair.

"So?" he says and smiles. He has horse teeth.

Melissa doesn't know what to say. She adjusts her position on the swing, uncrossing one leg and letting it dangle.

Jack tilts his head and gives her a sly squint, as if they have a secret understanding.

"Felicitations," he says.

"Excuse me?"

"Felicitations." When she doesn't respond, he asks, "Didn't you guys just have a wedding anniversary?"

"Oh!" Melissa laughs. "Oh, no, no!" She laughs again. "We're just dating. Last night was the six-month anniversary of our first date."

Jack's brow crinkles. Then he laughs too. "Good! Now I don't have to feel offended that you didn't invite me to your wedding!"

There is a silence during which Melissa wonders if he is expecting some sort of apology.

Fixed smiles. Askew gazes.

"You two make a nice couple," says Jack.

When has this guy ever seen us together? Melissa wonders. "Thank you," she says.

"So, *are* you getting married?"

Melissa pretends to flick something off her knee. "No." Her voice is quiet. "We're not at that stage."

"Oh. Sorry!"

"Well … you know …" She sighs, shrugs.

He lifts one foot and prods the calf of her dangling leg with his big toe. "Just curious." He smiles.

Melissa pulls her leg back onto the swing.

Jack looks off toward the parked cars, then at Melissa. "So, what do you think of these Galeanos?"

"I don't really know them yet—except Spencer, of course."

Jack grunts. "They're a trip."

"What do you mean?"

“Oh, I don’t know. …” He pouts ironically. “I mean, like this fucking will thing! I mean, really, what’s *that* all about?”

“What will?”

“Didn’t Spence tell you?”

Melissa shakes her head and flushes, feeling she has just been revealed as a second-rate girlfriend.

Jack’s sly squint returns, but he doesn’t say anything.

“What about the will?” she asks.

“It’s vanished. For twenty years it’s been in this one folder in Millie’s filing cabinet, but now it’s gone, and Harriet’s claiming that Millie has left her the house.”

“Is that in the will?”

“Of course not! That’s the whole point!”

“But if it’s not in the will, how can Harriet say that?”

“You obviously don’t know Harriet!” Jack laughs. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. That’s what I mean about these Galeanos!”

Melissa frowns and purses her lips. “So, what happened?”

“Well, the will’s one of those fill-in-the-blank deals they sell at stationery stores. On this day of blah-ba-dee-blah, being of sound mind and—you know: body. That sort of thing. And it ends with this totally standard clause about the estate being divided *equally* among the kids. *Equally.* That’s what it says. Tess has seen it ten thousand times. So has everybody. So anyhow, they’re talking about the funeral home, and Tess says they should check the will to see if Millie said anything about what she wants done with her body. And Harriet’s like, ‘Oh, we can just decide for ourselves’—which obviously makes zero sense. And when Tess discovers the will is gone, Harriet’s all, ‘How strange. I wonder how that happened.’ But then she says, ‘Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you: Mom changed the will and she’s leaving me the house.’”

“Whoa!” Melissa cups her cheek with her hand.

“I know!” Jack says. “How *convenient*—right? She tells everybody they’re screwed out of their inheritance, and the will just happens to have disappeared!”

“So, what will they do?”

“What this family always does.”

“Which is what?”

“Harriet will get everything she wants.”

“Why? How can that be possible?”

Jack makes a scoffing noise and shakes his head slowly. “You should probably ask that boyfriend of yours.”

“What do you mean?”

Jack smiles. “Do you really want to know?”

Melissa notices that one of Jack’s front teeth is lighter than the other and that the edges of his nostrils are laced with ruptured capillaries. She says nothing.

“Well, maybe I should just stay out of it.” He clamps his mouth shut and folds his arms. “But on the other hand, maybe this is something you actually should know.” He licks his lips. “And perhaps you already do.”

Melissa’s mouth goes dry. A hollow opens inside her chest.

“I mean,” says Jack, “you’ve probably been with Spence long enough to have noticed that he doesn’t exactly have a complete set of—you know: cojones.”

Melissa’s head jerks back as if she’s been hit.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Jack holds up both palms like a traffic cop. “I didn’t mean to offend. That’s just how it’s always been. Anything Harriet wants, Spence is like, ‘Sure thing! Absolutely!’ He’s like her enabler.”

Melissa is standing. The porch swing, having lurched away as she slid out of it, rams the back of her thighs.

“Jesus Christ!” she says. “What the fuck!”

“Sorry.” Jack puts one hand on the floor and uncrosses his legs. “I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” He shoves off the floor and rises, first hunched, then straightening. “You should just see what happens.”

The instant Jack reaches his full height there is a loud click in the kitchen, and a low shudder. The walls of the house begin to hum to the vibration of an electric motor. In the basement a different motor makes a repeated snarling yawn.

The porch light is on. It flickers. Stays lit.

“You’ll see,” says Jack. “Just see for yourself. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Melissa comes out of the tiny bathroom under the stairs to find Spencer standing just inside the front door, looking as if he has walked into the wrong house.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey." He half lifts his forearms for an embrace, but they fall back to his sides. His face is deflated. One of his white shirttails has come out of his pants.

Melissa approaches him, but she too keeps her arms at her side. "What happened?" she says, and when he only looks confused, she adds, "I hurried back so I could go with you, but you were already gone."

"Oh." He purses his lips apologetically, but says nothing.

She flings her arms around him. "Don't worry about it." She presses her chest against his chest; her whole face goes pink. "I just wanted to be there for you."

She pulls back and takes hold of both his hands. "How did it go?" Her smile is tender, sad.

"Oh, you know." He makes a short exhalation. "A barrel of laughs." Now he too is smiling, but only for an instant. "She's going to be cremated."

Melissa has always been horrified by cremation, but she keeps that fact to herself. "Is that what you want?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I don't really care."

"Is that what your mother wanted?"

"Harriet says she did. I never really talked to her about it."

"What does Tess say?"

"Oh, Tess and Harriet never agree about anything."

"What about the will?" says Melissa.

Spencer's brow knots with perplexity.

"The will," she repeats. "Jack said the will is missing and that Harriet wants the house."

"Oh, that's nothing. It's around here somewhere. It'll turn up."

"But what about the house?"

Again: that look of perplexity.

"Harriet can't just take the house," Melissa insists. "It belongs to all of you."

“I don’t want the house. It depresses me. There’s no way I’m ever going to live here again.”

Melissa lets go of his hands. “But it’s a matter of principle! The house is your inheritance.”

“I don’t care about that. Harriet loves the house, and she’s got nothing else. I think she should have it.”

Two pizza boxes on the round dining-room table: one primavera, one sausage. Two jugs of Chilean merlot, both nearly empty. The power is still on, but the lights in the dining room are off. Four burning candles like red stalagmites atop silver pedestals.

Outside the window: frenetic yips, forlorn wails.

They’re back, thinks Melissa. They’re all around the house.

“Just because you believe it doesn’t mean it’s true,” says Tess.

Although Tess can’t be older than forty-five, her hair is zinc gray and she has the papery skin of a dedicated smoker. Her dark eyes are too close together, which makes her stare fierce.

“Why don’t you just say what you really mean?” says Harriet, who is sitting between her siblings. Melissa is sitting between Spencer and Jack. She wants to listen to what the siblings are saying, but Jack is leaning close, his voice rumbling in her ear.

“Why?” he says.

He has just refilled her wineglass. He’s been filling it all evening and she has been drinking because the alcohol helps keep her awake. She doesn’t think she’s drunk, though when she is not looking directly at the ceiling, it seems to be reeling away.

“I just feel too crowded,” she tells Jack. “I want to be out where the sky is everywhere and you can see all the way to the horizon.”

Spencer has been talking to his sisters, but Melissa only hears his final words: “We need to be practical.”

“I look out my window,” says Jack, “and all I see is emptiness. Big roads with no cars on them. No countryside. No real fields like the ones here. Just vast parking lots filled with corn.”

At first Melissa has no idea what he is talking about, but then she remembers he lives in rural Illinois.

"No," she says. "I mean in the *west* West. You know: Colorado, Wyoming. I just feel that I could be freer there. Not so hemmed in. Also, the people there are different. More open. Not so worried about what everybody thinks. More in touch with—you know: the land."

"They're all Republicans," says Jack. He takes a sip from his glass and puts it back on the table. A purple flood line runs between his nose and lip.

Tess has been speaking and now Spencer replies: "Money's not everything."

Melissa tells Jack: "I don't care about that. People are people to me. I don't care about their politics. Religion. Whatever. Anyhow, I'm tired of playing it safe. I want to bust out. Be someplace real. Find out who I am. I mean, sometimes I feel like my whole life is fake. What kind of life is that?"

Jack smiles slyly and leans close. "So, are you going to do it?" His breath puffs against her cheek.

"What?"

"Move out west."

"Yes," she says. "I'm thinking about it. I'm definitely—you know: checking things out."

"OK. But if you do that, what about—" He nods furtively in the direction of Spencer, to whom her back is turned.

Melissa is not sure she has ever disliked anyone as intensely as she dislikes Jack. His left hand—the one nearest her—is resting knuckles down on his knee. She is sure that in a few seconds that hand will lift into the air and come down firmly on her thigh.

Tess slams her fist on the table. "This is fucking bullshit! You think I don't see what you're doing!"

Melissa's heart pounds. Cold sweat prickles out all over her body.

But Tess is not looking at her, or at Jack. She is staring at Harriet. "I am so fucking tired of your manipulative incompetence!"

"Tess, come on!" says Spencer. "That's not going to help."

“Jesus Christ, Spence! What is the fucking matter with you! Don’t you see what she’s doing?”

“I just think we need to be reasonable. Insults won’t accomplish anything.”

Melissa is looking at Spencer and thinking that he is afraid to live, that he is passionless, that his soul is in a cage made of compromise, lies, and fear. That’s why she has always felt stifled by him. That’s why, never once, not for a single second, has she ever truly loved him.

The back of her chair hits the floor with a flat wham.

She is standing. Spencer is looking at her, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. The only sound in the room is the hiss of the capped seltzer bottle in front of Harriet’s plate.

Melissa does not know why she stood up. “I’m sorry,” she says. The floor sways beneath her feet, and her head whirls in the empty space between the tabletop and the ceiling. “I have to go for a walk. I need some fresh air.”

Nobody says a word. She strides from the room, leaving her chair lying on the floor.

First she walks, then runs, her flip-flops slapping her heels, her feet thudding against the hard clay of the rutted track, cool, sweet air flowing into her lungs. This is good, she thinks. This is what I need. Her head is clearing.

For a while she runs after her shadow, which grows longer and longer as she gets farther from the porch light. But as the road darkens, her shadow becomes ever harder to see, until finally she is just a body moving in blackness, accompanied by the gentle ringing of crickets and peepers, the sound of air flowing past her ears, and of her own breaths, her heart, and her running feet. She seems to be staying right in the middle of the track, however, and she thinks that maybe she can keep it up until her eyes adjust. But then, without slacking her pace in the slightest, she pulls her phone out of her hip pocket, hits the flashlight app, and sends an ash-gray beam bounding out in front of her.

The night air chills her bare skin, but the water around her feet, her ankles, her shins is reasonably warm. She wades out until the custardy mud beneath her feet gives way to prickly lakeweed, then she flings herself forward. “Oh!” she shouts, hearing her voice and splashes echoing off the trees. “Oh my God!” She lowers her head into the water and swims as hard as she can, hoping to banish the cold from her shoulders and legs.

Now she is drifting on her back, panting. The exposed portions of her face, chest, and shoulders feel glazed with ice, but her body beneath the surface is comfortable—though on the edge of being chilly. She wonders if the air is cold enough for her breath to fog. She blows, but can’t see anything. There are no stars. She lifts her head out of the water and scans the lakeshore. In a direction that she imagines to be northwest, the silhouetted edge of the treetops is visible against a faint, liver-gray illumination. Otherwise, there is no distinction between the woods and the sky.

A weirdly elastic cry sounds from the darkness just beside the lake, possibly from the very place she entered the water, though she can’t see anything clearly enough to be certain which direction she is facing. She hears more cries from farther away, each of them ending with an almost-whispered yip. So beautiful! Melissa thinks. She is not sure she has ever heard a more beautiful sound. A chill runs through her whole body—perhaps in response to the beauty, but also, she realizes, because she is now truly cold. Her jaw is clenching. Soon her teeth will start to chatter. She tenses her stomach muscles to keep from shivering, and listens to the coyote cries, near and far, first on one side of the lake, then on the other—and then, it seems, everywhere at once: the whole night alive with wild joy.

Fur, Bark, Feather, Leaf, Faun

Matt Bell

What is real, what and when is real? Returned again from the flicker, the faun Chapman becomes obsessed with the question. But the natural world, the granted given of the Territory in the year of 1799, in this only time he thinks of as *his*, Chapman believes this is the best answer to his question, even if it does not fully satisfy, if it does not resolve wholly with the apple planter's life he and Nathaniel have chased for the past decade. Left to wander one late summer afternoon, Chapman roams the next uncut strand of forest, he kneels in black dirt to lift the loam in his clawed hands, working the moist life of the humus between his fingers, the soil rich with nutrients and smelling of rot and decay and potential, every handful riven with beetles, maggots, worms, bits of decomposing plant matter, seeds and shells slipping between his fingers. He scrapes at the raw earth with his hooves, the earth only seemingly solid, seemingly permanent, but every inch tells a story of passing sunlight and rain and birth and growth and death, of ice and snow and heat and drought, the earth itself never static, always being shaped from above by weather and abundance, from below by the tectonic shifting of the earth's plates, by the tremblings of earthquakes in distant parts of the continent, by the slowly sloshing movement of great quantities of water captured in cavernous aquifers, buried deep between drowned pillars of ancient stone.

How much slow attention it takes to read such a story! And all that story only preamble to the one Nathaniel and Chapman and all the other men coming west aim to tell, the story of the productive earth of men being made by ax and shovel and plow.

Pausing along a thin game path, Chapman puts his hands to a granite boulder taller than any man he's ever seen. Leaning his weight into its massive solidity, he tests its immovable resistance, studies how its knobby

surface is softened by lichen and moss, by streaks of guano and bird shit. The realness of the boulder's weight, the realness of the moss and the shit. A glitter-scaled lizard skitters over the boulder's hulking bulk and Chapman knows the lizard is real too, that its life is real, but real cannot mean merely alive. It does not mean merely solidity, presence.

Many fake things, Chapman thinks, are alive, many living but fake things have a solid presence in the world. You can touch them, you can help them or hurt them, you can hear them cry out in pleasure or pain, but that alone does not make them real.

He turns a hand in front of his face, watches a tick crawl harmlessly through the fur along the back of his wrist. Surrounding Chapman and the tick, there is the uncut forest taken as a whole, an organism entire, made of many kinds of life, many kinds of nonlife too. Then there is each individual piece of that whole, many visible only if his attention lingers, if he learns the names other men have gifted the pieces of the world. Oak and maple and pine. Deer and elk and moose. The gray wolf, the red fox, the common coyote. Blue jays, cardinals, robins, ravens, and crows. If Chapman tarried long enough, he believes he could learn the individual titles of each of these beings, what they are called by men, then what they call themselves in their own languages, the barks and yips and birdsong, the scented airs of bloom and branch. But does a creature need to have a name to be real? What Chapman is was first called a *faun* and what does that make him, what does his matching that description prove, except that he is something shaken loose from a story?

And surely not all stories are real. Surely anything but that.

What is real, the creature Chapman asks again. What is it that makes this place real and another not?

The flicker has shown him a future in which there is less realness than there is here, he knows this and still he struggles to define exactly what it is the future has lost.

Chapman feels his mind grasping toward the revelation, a revelation held just out of his mind's reach. He begins to move more frantically through the forest, putting his palms against trunk and root, upon rock and branch, soon he is on his hands and knees, digging claws into the dirt as if the answers to

his questions might lie just below the surface of the earth, buried below pine straw and fallen beechnuts, hidden underneath an owl pellet he picks up and discards into the brush. The real, the real, the real, what is it? Around him birds flutter into flight, startled by his manic movements through ferns that sweep dirt from his furred flanks, each bird flying less than a dozen feet before taking up a new perch from which to squawk its disapproval of Chapman's frantic curiosity, of his desire to know always more, to possess all the knowledge of this world, to make the world into his possession by that knowing.

Leaving the birds behind, Chapman comes upon the remains of a hide shelter perched upon a hill, at the high point of a hidden meadow. A failed inhabitation, the shelter abandoned, creaking poles lashed together with sinew and cord, covered with rotting furs. He ducks inside, considers the inside of animals scraped raw, made walls: deerskin, elk skin, the tanned underside of what might have been a bear. On the inside every beast looks the same—even a faun, even a man. Upon the dirt shelter floor is a circle of stones, a black scratch of ash from a long-ago fire, a scattering of bones. The shelter unused for at least a season, maybe longer. He crouches in the dirt and ash, sniffs at the shadows. He scuffs the floor with a hoof until an almost-extinct human trace rises to tickle his nostrils. Hunger, desperation, want and want and want. Half-wild Chapman cannot sleep inside but if rain were falling he might return here, stay warm for a little while longer. Not that he is ever really cold—sometimes he looks at his thick skin and wonders if he is not just half goat but half tree too, a body of bone covered by bark and fur. Who was it that slept in this space last? A company of men, Chapman thinks, no women or children. Hunters moving through the Cold Moon snow, seeking meat in the year's thinnest season. Their hunger lingers, a months-old stink of desperation soaked like sweat into the captured air. Chapman cannot stay. Not inside this ruin of branch and scraped skin, wracked by weather. Not inside the hungry memory of the men who last slept here, whose hunger haunts every breath of trapped air.

Back outside, Chapman pauses at the meadow's edge, sits back on his hooves, breathing hard, his limbs heavy and tired. He takes a deep breath, lets his body still. It takes a moment for his body to quiet but once it does

he sees how this bit of forest is mostly unaffected by him, now that he's ceased his scurrying. Bright birds flit from branch to branch of their own accord, a red fox wanders by without a glance at Chapman, stepping lightly on the soft pads of its nimble feet. Chapman stays put, he tries to be even more still, more silent. His breathing slows, he focuses on each breath filling his lungs, each breath emptying out his mouth and nose. Time passes, the sun moves above the trees, the shadows shift slightly. A black bear cub appears at the meadow's edge, snuffling through the underbrush, hunting for nuts or berries. Chapman lets his attention fall on it lightly, so lightly that even with his gaze he does not risk disturbing the cub.

The longer Chapman sits the more he sees. The cub stays, rolls around in the fallen leaves, rests gently on its side. A dragonfly buzzes by Chapman's head, bombing a gathering of gnats off his left ear. Horseflies land in Chapman's fur and he does not brush them away; he lets them bite him if they will. It is harder to see how the trees accept his impartiality but he hopes they do; he hopes they are just as happy to be left alone as any creeping, crawling thing might be. He imagines the slow life of a tree, of anything rooted in one place, taking on whatever weather might come. What tree could want for anything more, anything else?

If an oak wanted something other than the life of an oak, it would have had to become something else first. And, perhaps, in another forest in another age, exactly this had happened—between the oak and the faun, there must be stretched such a spectacular splendor of wanting, creating newly varied life.

Whatever the forest is, it doesn't require Chapman. He can participate, he can be a part of the life he sees, but it doesn't need him, it doesn't crave his thoughts or desires or impositions. The forest is made of many creatures, fur and bark, feather and leaf. The forest is something self-willed, something living for itself—it is not for him any more than it is from him. And this, he thinks, at last he thinks, is what makes the forest real: self-will.

The forest is an organism made of many organisms, and as long as every part of it is allowed to be what it is, for its own reasons, then it has self-will, and anything that has self-will is real. As real as any man, as real as any faun who lives among them.

But for a man that realness comes with a cost. But for Chapman, a faun who wants to be a man like his Nathaniel brother is a man, the cost is the same: to separate your own self-will from the self-will of the world around you is to set yourself apart, to see yourself opposed.

Chapman thinks of the orchards he and Nathaniel have planted. He thinks of all the work that must be done to prepare a nursery, to carve it from the world that was: the trees that must be removed, the rocks that must be rolled away, the earth that must be tilled before the planting can begin. He thinks of the work that must be done each and every year after, to keep the nurseries viable, to let the trees grow as he desires them: the building of fences, the pruning of suckers, the remove of other plants that try to claim the same cleared space for themselves. How the brothers have worked to prevent deer from eating their saplings bare, how they drive away all the small gnawing mammals, how they wish to protect their trees from worms and flies and other pests: all this effort, year after year, to make just one patch of earth into what they will it to be!

How real is an apple tree, grown in such a place? An almost identical tree, grown from a seed dropped in the scat of a bear or the dropping of a bird, it would have the same self-will as anything else, would live only for itself. But what of Chapman's nurseries, Nathaniel's trees, the saplings they wanted to sell to the west-bent settlers whose grateful dollars Nathaniel was sure would make the brothers rich?

The brothers' apple trees most often flourish wherever they are planted; they are in many ways indistinguishable from a wild tree of the same type —but as long as a being exists only to fulfill human desire, as long as its life is dependent upon that desire—then Chapman begins to see that its life might not be a real life, if real means self-willed, if real means *free*.

Nathaniel speaks always in the righteous language of the eager settler, proud of *stewarding* the land, of *improving* the country: how the Territory was earth that could not be put to its right uses until its swamps were drained, its forests made passable to man and horse, ox and wagon. Until wide wooden roads were laid over every hill and through every dale. Until the mountains had all been mined for their deep treasures, stores of ore that were surely vast and inexhaustible and meant as gifts for the hardy men

who could find them in the dark and bring them up into the light, where their glitter might enrich mankind.

Yes, a tree had to die so a man might build a house, Chapman had heard Nathaniel say so many nights, but surely there would never be any shortage of trees.

The given world was not perfect, Nathaniel had said, but it could be made so by the efforts of good men. God had made the world, God had given the world to men, and men would show God their thanks by perfecting what he had made. And if it was in good works that a man showed his own worth, could the world not be improved by the same, by being made into the shape in which it might best be used?

"Heaven on earth is our goal," Nathaniel always said. "Nothing less than heaven on earth, with two kingdoms carved out of it, one for you and one for me."

At dusk, exhausted Chapman heads back toward the riverside camp where Nathaniel waits, where tomorrow they will pack their camp, ready to move on, deeper into the great black swamp, searching for a promising place to plant their next nursery. As the light fails, Chapman descends a narrow ridgeline into a salt lick marred by poorly thin birch trees, the lick populated by a dozen elk does standing ankle-deep in the scummy water: the big brown bodies shine in the late light, sunbeams falling weakly through the canopy to further soften the sight of their fur. He comes upon the elk gently, passing between their number without any intent, wanting to be nothing more than a hooved beast among hooved beasts.

At his approach, the largest of the does lifts her swollen head, eyeing him suspiciously, then shaking her waddle of fur in unmistakable warning. The doe snorts and Chapman snorts back and the doe puts her head back to the ground, angrily licking loose minerals trapped in clay. The sun is still out but the shadows are chilly and Chapman shivers just once when he sees jutting from the ground an expanse of preserved white rib cage, stony bones far too large to belong to an elk or any other local ruminant, and beside it he spies the curve of a single tusk, its tip seemingly having pierced the earth from below. How uninterested the elk are in these half-buried fossils, because whatever great mammal the rib and tusk belonged to lives here no

longer, is of no matter to those left. Gone, gone, gone, like so much else. A giant beast, bigger than anything else living in the Territory woods, a monster of another age lost to ice, lost to starvation, lost to spear or arrow.

Something once real, now reduced to story. Hunted to extinction long before any beast on this continent ever heard a rifle shot, the clattering sound of powder-hot musket balls rattling through the trees.

What Chapman knows, what he does not want to know but knows anyway, because where he goes in the flicker everyone knows some part of the story: five years after this century turns, the last buffalo in the Ohio Territory dies. And then sometime after goes the last timber wolf. The last black panther. The last lynx. Every wild turkey soon dead and served for dinner. Every duck and goose and prairie chicken. The Ohio black bear, gone. The Ohio white-tailed deer, gone. The Ohio elk at this Ohio salt lick, every one of them soon Ohio-dead.

By the time Nathaniel dies, not so many years from now, other men like him will already be restocking replanted woods, placing tame deer beneath planted trees. But not every animal will be replaced, not every plant: only the ones men desire, and only if they do as men wish. Deer in the woods but not in the fields. Trees in the yard, but their roots hacked back from every foundation. The given earth reduced to what belongs to man, populated by what man allows.

This salt lick will vanish even sooner, washed away by rushing water moving along new paths, spring floods able to track everywhere the forest was cut, the drained swamps no longer there to absorb the surge. What comes next: vast, rolling hills of farmland, divided into neat squares of rowed crops, fenced-in acres for cattle, goats, sheep. And on some of those farms there will appear whatever remains of an orchard of trees planted by Chapman and Nathaniel—and will what remains be real, as Chapman now means the word, compared to what was gone?

If the world is everywhere only human desire, is that enough to make a world real?

What will happen next? Chapman doesn’t know, the flicker hasn’t taken him so far yet. But despite Nathaniel’s claims for the invincibility of the earth, Chapman has seen by the flicker that nothing is static, that change is

constant and constantly accelerating, that the fulfillment of every human hunger always speeds it onward. The world Chapman sees in the flicker is different from the Territory but that future will not last either, not forever. He doesn't know if the when he visits lasts a year or a decade or a century. He thinks it is very far away from his own time but he doesn't know that either, not for sure. He believes only that like all worlds it has bounds, beginning and end and borders on all sides, and that whatever exists outside those bounds might be wholly unimaginable to that time's inhabitants, as unknowable to the inhabitants of the flicker as the flicker would be to others alive in Chapman's today, in this plank of time he has inhabited all this life.

The elk move freely about Chapman, no longer paying him any mind. Their wills are their own, their wants local, immediate, here and now. The elk have their own pasts and futures but Chapman does not think they live much in either. Their past is gone, their future not yet made. It is only the now that is present, only the present where they can act. Unlike Chapman and Nathaniel and the other settlers coming west, more and more each year, the elk would be content to live in this given world forever, a part of this forest swamp exactly as important as any other. It is already their real world, the only world they have known or imagined possible.

But men do not want to live in the world the elk live in. Chapman's brother Nathaniel wants to live in a world he has imagined, a more productive world, a world where he will possess new riches and wider fame. For ten years now, Chapman has worked to make Nathaniel's world appear, to make the things of Nathaniel's imaginings solid, touchable, ownable. Nathaniel has told him that this dream world is the real world, the one that is meant to be, the one God tasked man with making. Nathaniel says these things but he has never lived there in such a world, not yet—but Chapman has, for in the flicker he has seen what this place will look like, when it is as Nathaniel says it will be.

It will be no place for elk, and no place for fauns either; it will be a place for only men, men and what men desire.

Perhaps Chapman no longer wants to help that world to come. But he does not know how to stop. Because it is not only Nathaniel's wants that drive the brothers onward in their plantings, year after struggling year, but

Chapman's as well—and even though he is only half a man he has lived so much more among other men than among the beasts and the trees that he does not know how to want less than the rest of the settlers, to say for himself that *this world is enough*, that it is enough to be a mere part of it, wanting nothing more than the one real moment, constantly renewing, in which it is possible to stay rooted simply by ceasing to crave all the future wheres and whens you might hope to own.

Tattersall

Madeline Kearin

It happened while I was planting the pansies: a jolt that halted the motion of my trowel and sent a rickety aftershock up my arm. To find rocks was common here, in this landscape abraded by receding glaciers, which left trails of stony debris in their wake. But this wasn't a rock. Its squared edges and planed surface betrayed it. I set it on the grass and rinsed it with the hose. The letters materialized slowly, catching needles of sunlight in their wet grooves.

Alexander
Son of Luke and Evelyn T. Rooney
Died May 7, 1853
Aged 3 months 2 days

Two months earlier, I stood at the window in the office of our apartment overlooking Riverside Park. A dull hum sounded in my ears, drawing menacing echoes out of the back of my skull. The desk was quilted so thickly with pages that piles had spilled onto the carpet, spreading all the way to the base molding.

I gathered up the chapters in order, one by one, and placed them in the big metal trash can that normally occupied the alcove between the kitchen sink and the refrigerator. Then I set them on fire. I watched the pages curl, contracting like rotten leaves, then break down into fine gray flakes that the smoke inhaled and blew away. The flames glowed a candied-orange color with a caramel-yellow core.

In a certain time and place, such an act might get you sent to Bedlam, where you'd spend three hundred years chained to the wall, awaiting the invention of Thorazine. In the here and now, it gets you sent to Westchester:

to a white clapboard house with eyebrow windows, a lawn circuited by flagstone paths, and gravestones in the back garden.

The historical society occupies a squat one-story building in a treelined neighborhood at the base of Bicknell Mountain. A railroad runs parallel to the street, and the leaves of the maples beside the tracks marble the red bricks and moss-thickened roof with anxious shadows.

I stand in front of the door like some extraterrestrial, applying the full force of its alien intelligence to the question of how to get inside. The two miles I walked from the old white house on Paisley Road felt like light-years. Weeks of curtailed movement and the medication pumping through my veins have reduced me to this, a simulacrum of a person. But they have also blasted away the social scaffolding that forced me to care what other people think.

I open the door into a room with a ceiling that is tented into a high vault. A colorful mural of oversized faces—Nelson Mandela, Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, each painted by a different hand—occupies one wall. A long table set with mismatched folding chairs aligns the center of the room, with rows of bookshelves on either side. A small, straight-backed old woman with a nimbus of cotton-candy hair is shelving books. A middle-aged man, his face etched with salt-and-pepper stubble, sits at the table, poring over crinkly yellow pages. He rises to greet me.

"I found a gravestone," I blurt out, before he has a chance to introduce himself.

Unfazed by my awkward opening, he reels into conversation as if we were old friends. Neither he nor the woman, who ambles slowly over, seems to notice that they are talking to a half human. They ask if I have pictures.

I show them, my fingers trembling as I splay the Polaroids on the table. You would think they were looking at a piece of fine art, something rare and exquisite, not some morbid curiosity encrusted with dirt.

"What does that say?" the woman asks. "Evelyn T.—"

"Rooney," I tell her. "It's a little hard to read in the photo."

The man wants to know where I live, and I tell him, along with my name, Ellen.

"Akinville!" he exclaims, launching into his next monologue. "That's the old name for your neighborhood—after Caleb Akin, who built the first gristmill there in the eighteenth century. You know, in the nineteenth century Akinville became a real center of industry. There was a needle factory, a wool factory, and then the Collier Optical Company built their factory there, in the 1870s. They were the largest manufacturer of eyeglasses in the world, if you can believe it—two hundred and fifty employees, making a million pairs of glasses a year."

While I listen politely, I do have a difficult time believing it. I have heard people—a neighbor, the realtor—refer to the area around the old white house as Akinville, but it's difficult to picture it as a *center of industry*. Paisley Road curves between parcels of woodland sparsely dotted with houses. The old white house is hooded by evergreens, which insulate it from the heat even on the hottest days, and—I imagine—submerge it in polar darkness in winter.

My thoughts are running ahead of themselves. I don't want to think about winter.

"What about Luke and Evelyn Rooney?" I ask. "Do you know anything about them?"

He shakes his head. "Doesn't ring a bell. You might try looking at the census or at the newspapers for obituaries. Louisa can help you with that. She's good."

Louisa is, in fact, very good. She tracks down the relevant documents in minutes, her kinked fingers working swiftly through sheaves of papers. While she does this we wade shallowly into conversation. Have I just moved to the area? Yes, I have, with my husband. How do we like Tattersall? It's very nice. Far enough from the city to provide a respite, but close enough for Owen to commute to work. (I am parroting the precise argument with which I was sold this move in the first place, leaving out, of course, the underlying motivation.) And do we like the house? Yes (an answer that rolls out over a small bump of hesitation, then lingers as I

refuse to qualify it, even when faced with Louisa's kindly quizzical expression).

And I continue to refuse, to my friends and family, to Owen, to myself, until we've been living there for almost three months.

Then, at last, I admit it—but only inwardly, knowing that this confession would tear open a rift beneath a foundation that has only just been (very shakily) rebuilt.

I don't like the old white house. I don't like the third-story windows, which are narrowed like glaring eyes, or the roof that pitches dramatically over them like a furrowed brow. Its narrow facade is harsh and accusatory, and its gaze tracks me as if it sees me as an unwanted interloper. I don't like the wide wooden floorboards that pitch beneath my step. The furnishings are old and ugly and not mine. The threadbare rugs, oversized four-poster bed, and the fussy little chairs in the parlor fill me with cold, gray rage.

I don't like Tattersall. It occupies a swampy sinkhole inside a circle of hills. When it rains, the brook springs its banks and the earth begins to ooze. In the park that abuts the backyard of the old white house, the wet grasses are clotted with droppings from Canada geese. The village is quiet, sepulchral. With its woods and its damp silence, it feels like a house whose windows are shuttered for eternity.

I'm overwhelmed by double claustrophobia, trapped in a dark house in a dark house. But I don't let on. On the contrary, most of my mental energy is directed toward my star performance, the act of being *fine*. Everything is good and fine and I am so much better. We can all go home now.

I'm the only one who can't go home. My home is a one-bedroom apartment in a fifth-story walk-up with academic journals crammed into every alcove. I last saw it under the astonishing spell of an interior blizzard, which blanked out the windows and carpeted the floors with ash. That ferocious gray snowfall still surges every night in my dreams and sometimes, I swear, just beyond the frame of my vision even while I am awake.

On the way back from the historical society, my bag bulging with papers, I decide to cut through the woods. I've spotted a break in the thickets of barberry bushes where the layers of past autumns' leaves are compacted into a path, which I am hoping will lead me to Paisley Road.

The sun sits lower than it did when I left the house, combing long shadows from the trees. The trunks on either side of me are huddled close together, and above my head, their limbs knit into a thick canopy, mottled by roaming sunlight. The path echoes the curve of a narrow stream, unconvincingly designated the Tattersall River. The water is congested with stones: some small and pebbly, others the size of giant tortoises, their rutted shells blackly wet and gleaming amid the foaming eddies.

The forest is wild and junglelike and almost beautiful, but I exist apart from it, anesthetized by my thoughts. I'm trying to resurrect the words that Owen spoke to me this morning, something about the schools in the district —*Apparently they're very good.* I spent a moment in silent astonishment toward this seeming non sequitur before I recognized the implication. When I did, my ears turned red, my own distinctive stigma of panic, which I ineffectively disguised by turning my face away from him and into the pages of *The New York Times*.

Realizing that he won't be there when I return to the house opens a floodgate of relief, and something akin to contentedness—perhaps its distant cousin—courses through my veins.

And so, distracted, I nearly trip over it before I see it: a jumble of bricks stretched across the path in front of me, their corners blunted, their surfaces pocked; some crumbling and broken, others nearly whole; some disarticulated, others held together in irregular hunks by bands of powdery mortar. Further on, thickened with dead leaves and branches, the bricks converge into a mound. The crescents of sunlight that scramble over its surface only hazily define its dimensions; most of it is curtained in shadow. The path twists around it, tracing its perimeter. I count the steps. The mound is studded with unidentifiable objects that poke through the debris: bits of metal and glass and what looks like calcified sludge, exuding a milky iridescence in the halved light.

As I come to the end of the mound, I step back and survey its full length, noticing how it rises from beneath the surface of the forest floor like a subterranean beast. It is in this act of observation that I notice that the path alongside the mound is freckled by stray points of light. One sparkles just beside my foot. I pick it up and angle it between my thumb and forefinger. It's an eyeglass lens—small and ovoid and neatly polished around the edges, perfect for the spectacles you might imagine perched on the tip of a schoolmaster's nose in the nineteenth century.

I collect the lenses as I go, cupping them in one hand, both hands, both pockets, then finally inverting the bottom of my shirt into a makeshift pouch. As I sweep away another layer of leaves to reveal a fresh scatter of lenses, a far-off train whistle jerks me back into my body. I have to leave now or I won't have time to wash my blackened hands and knees, make the house presentable, and to mold myself convincingly into the postures of productive convalescence.

Perhaps because my eyes are primed by the exercise of gathering lenses, a subtle disruption in the fabric of a nearby tree pricks my vision as I follow the path past the mound. I stop to confirm that what I have seen is not simply a trick of the light.

Pinned into the trunk with a single rusty nail, just slightly below eye level, is a wooden figure, perhaps eight inches tall. Studying it, I count six discrete pieces. One is the head: a round dome of hair encircling a narrow face, carved to delineate the swell of the cheeks, the dent of the chin, the long, straight nose, and the hollows in which are set the tiny eyes, barely larger than poppy seeds. Two thick twigs, perpendicular, form the body and arms. Neither is shaped, except for blunt cuts at the end of each arm and at the top of the body where it articulates with the head. The lower end of the body is uncut, uneven, and slightly splintered in a way that evokes the flowing folds of a long robe that render the figure's feet unseen. At the end of each arm, a delicately carved hand has been slotted into the wood. The final piece forms the wings that stretch upward from either side of the figure. A series of soft, linear nicks along the surface of each wing and little nicks along their outer edges give the impression of feathers.

My first thought is, *No one will ever believe that I saw this.*

My second thought is more like an impulse, which bypasses the realm of conscious thought to communicate directly with my muscles. In the base of the trunk, beneath the figure, is a small hollow cluttered with decaying leaves. I kneel and sweep the leaves out with one hand, while the other cradles my pouch of tinkling lenses; then I invert the pouch, and allow the lenses to tumble into the hollow. I use my hands to form the pile of glass into a mound. Pausing for a moment to survey my work, another spike of what could almost be called pleasure flits into my body, momentarily reawakening a dormant pathway of feeling before it disappears.

I first identify Luke and Evelyn Rooney in the 1850 United States Federal Census, a document that is at once minutely detailed and maddeningly vague. I am sitting hunched over at the desk in the guest bedroom, my eyes busily unraveling the knots of tiny, crabbed handwriting, and copying what seem like the most important details onto a long white notepad.

Free inhabitants in Tattersall, in the County of Westchester, State of New York, enumerated on the 7th day of June, 1850.

Household no. 382.

Lucas Rooney. Age: 21. Sex: M. Color (Left blank. I quickly discover that this section of the census is only completed in the instances where the person *isn't* white). *Profession, Occupation, or Trade: Works in wool factory. Value of Real Estate owned* (Blank). *Place of Birth: Ireland. Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict* (Blank).

Evelyn Rooney. Age: 19. Sex: F. No race, occupation, or real estate value is given. She was born in Ireland. She wasn't an idiot or a convict.

They have no children. Their son, I note, wouldn't be born—deducing from the date on the gravestone—until February 5, 1853. As Louisa informed me, the census was only conducted every ten years, and birth certificates weren't required by the state of New York until the 1880s. Furthermore, the church in Tattersall that Luke and Evelyn might have attended—assuming that they, like most Irish immigrants, were Catholic—burned in 1914, destroying any potential baptismal or death records. It is likely that the only evidence that Alexander Rooney ever existed is sitting next to me in this room, propped up against the wall between a jade plant

and a crooked stack of *The Journal of Neurology*, shedding a loose corona of dirt onto the floorboards.

Louisa couldn't find Luke and Evelyn in the 1860 census of Tattersall. Either they had moved, or died. I asked her about immigration papers. Would Ellis Island have kept a record of the Rooneys' entry into the United States? No, she told me, Ellis Island wasn't opened until 1892. It would have been Castle Garden, assuming that they came through the Port of New York. Many Irish immigrants came through Boston and then moved to other places in the country. And it wasn't uncommon for people in the nineteenth century who didn't own their homes to move every one or two years.

I am staring at the scribbled lines that compose Luke and Evelyn's names as if there was some hidden meaning laced into the words that I might unravel. The census taker *saw* Luke and Evelyn, spoke to them, perhaps even went inside their house. He knew whether their hair was light or dark, whether they were tall or short, where they lived in the village (the census isn't specific about location), and how they spoke. He knew if Luke Rooney was already going bald; perhaps, like Owen, his hair had retracted slightly just above his temples, ceding precious territory to his forehead. He knew if Evelyn Rooney smiled too much, or too little, or whether she had nervous habits, like touching her neck or picking the cuticles of her fingers while she answered his questions. He knew if their home was messy or neat or cramped or spacious and if it smelled like soap or dirty laundry or that morning's baking. All of these things, which I would very much like to know, seem as though they occupy a space beyond the census page, hovering just out of reach.

There's a vast chasm between the mysteries you don't recognize are there and those that you do. Realizing that evidence is missing feels like its own discovery, one that quickly folds into itself, like a star that shines bright enough to snag your attention and then implodes, drawing you irreversibly inward. I am all too familiar with these intellectual black holes. The last one that I encountered ended in an inferno.

Returning to the historical society the following week, I spend nearly four hours with Louisa and her companion (the village historian, whose name I

have just learned is Bill) in the sweltering room, which seems to condense all of the bulk of the July heat inside its eaves, then press it down onto our heads. Bill and I are detonating tiny sweat bombs all over the documents we're examining, while Louisa, prim in her yellow sweater set and pressed gray slacks, seems oblivious to our discomfort.

Our quest is to determine whether the gravestone belonged to a family burying ground—as common a fixture in nineteenth-century backyards as patio furniture is today—or a communal cemetery. The idea of an entire village of people in my backyard, mingling with the roots of my Swiss chard and poking their skeletal fingers into my potatoes, causes the substance of my stomach to invert. I feel the familiar hollowed sensation of a panic attack nipping at my ears and excuse myself to the bathroom, where I drown my wrists in cold water and tell the peaked face in the mirror that she's not going to die—not today, anyway.

I ride back into the room on a wave of postanxiety endorphins. In the time I have been gone, Bill has located two more maps of Akinville, bringing the total number up to nine, ranging between 1761 and 1920. Looking through them feels like surveying a child's school photos in succession. Here's Akinville in the year it was first settled, when it consisted solely of a small homestead and mill beside the river. Here's Akinville amid the fervor of the Revolutionary War, hatched with yellow crosses representing French troops and red ones representing Patriots. Here's Akinville swollen with industry, its fields parceled into factory and house lots, a section of the river diverted into a raceway to fuel the grinding and polishing machines of the Collier Optical Company.

The old white house is present on every map but the first—it's even older than I thought—but the property lines are different from what they are today. The rectangle surrounding the house—which was owned, according to different maps, by men named Joseph Akin (1775), Browning Akin (1810), Merritt Hewlett (1836 and 1852), Albert Sarles (1871 and 1878), and Percy Brundage (1920)—is separate from what is now the garden. In the first three maps, the garden area is an empty lot. Then, in 1852, the words appear: *St. F. Cem.*

"Well, look at that," Bill says. "It was the Catholic cemetery."

“Doesn’t St. Joseph’s bury people in Oakwood?” says Louisa.

“Oakwood wasn’t established until 1882. They must have been burying people somewhere before that. Apparently, it was Ellen’s backyard.”

“But wait,” I say, feeling the beads of sweat thicken on the back of my neck, “if you look at the 1920 map, the cemetery has been absorbed into the property of Percy Brundage. It’s not marked anymore. What happened to it?”

Bill and I crane our necks, and Louisa nods her reading glasses off her forehead and onto her nose to examine it.

“Can a cemetery just disappear?” I ask.

Bill shrugs. “It’s possible. Old burying grounds get neglected—the stones fall down. It doesn’t take long for them to get covered up and forgotten. You might try talking to Father Lowry. He could tell you whether anyone remembers an old Catholic cemetery.”

On the way out, Louisa asks how I am getting home. When I tell her that I plan to walk through the woods, her forehead ruffles in concern.

“Oh, dear, I’m not sure you should do that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not safe for a young woman to walk there alone.”

Before I can ask her to explain, Bill blusters between us with a piece of paper in his hand, showing an 1868 obituary for a Thomas McKinney with the words *to be buried in the Catholic cemetery*, and suddenly I have two names to populate my garden.

There was a version of me that would have heeded Louisa’s warning, despite its vagueness, and even if I thought she was wrong. In New York, I had a keen appreciation for the geography of danger. In my internal map of the city, I had marked out the areas that were safe and those that were not, and much of my mental power was channeled into navigating between them —a black-tiles-are-lava approach that I followed with childlike fidelity.

Perhaps because the Lexapro has buffed off the sharper edges of my anxiety or perhaps because of an overriding desire to return to that haunted sanctuary of brick mounds and scattered lenses, I walk through the woods

undeterred. There was a thunderstorm last night and the air, baked to a humid stillness, is weighted with the fragrant must of wet leaves.

When I arrive at the brick mound, I find that the rain has husked a layer of debris from the ground, exposing a fresh spread of lenses. But I stop after picking up only a handful when I spot something in the hollow of the tree beneath the angel.

I kneel at the foot of the trunk, feeling uncomfortably like a supplicant to the wooden figure. The pile of lenses that I left is gone; in its place is a small object that I pick up in my wobbly fingers. It's a bird, carved from a single piece of wood. Its body is small and globular, just the right size and shape for the palm of my hand, and tapers into a round head with a pointed beak and pinpoint eyes. I note that the carver has taken advantage of the natural grain in the wood to delineate the contours of the wings, which are folded into its body.

It sounds odd to say it, but I feel that somehow—through some archaic, reptilian part of my brain—I have tapped into the internal logic of another being, communicating wordlessly that the bird has been offered in exchange for the lenses. Drawn into that same logic, I feel compelled to leave something in return. I place the bird on my lap so that I can undo the clasp of my necklace, a plain sterling silver heart on a chain that Owen gave me three Christmases ago; then I hook the chain around the angel's neck.

I shiver slightly as I do so, feeling as though a shadow has passed through me. I recall Louisa's warning. Was this what she meant? Had someone before me—some similarly foolhardy young woman, no doubt—been drawn into the mysterious economy of the angel tree, and been … what, exactly? Murdered by a wood-carving psychopath? Accosted by factory workers' ghosts? I glance around, as though I might glean some clue from the trees, but there is nothing—only the same pockmarked sunlight and the contented burbling of the swollen brook.

Owen arrives home around 7:00 p.m., radiating the aroma of sweaty bodies herded into contained spaces, his thinning hair plastered streakily to his head, and launches into a tirade about Metro-North as though continuing a conversation we were already having.

“And another thing,” he says as he unfastens the buttons of his shirt, “what’s with the people who live in Dudley? Every time I see someone who’s talking way too loudly on their phone or being obnoxious to the conductor, I think to myself, *I bet that person’s getting off in Dudley.* And I’m always right!”

I am not so much a participant in these kinds of conversations as a surface for them to bounce off. This isn’t tennis and I’m not a player. It’s racquetball, and I am the wall.

But after a few minutes, when he’s wound down and all of his clothes are on the floor, he comes over and puts his hands on my shoulders, threading his face into the space between my head and neck, and looks down at the documents in front of me.

“What’s that you’re working on, El? More from the historical society?”

I nod. “I haven’t been able to find anything more about the Rooneys, but I’ve been reading more about the history of Akinville. Do you know why the factories all shut down? Because in 1888 a man named Judge Jacob Browning, who owned the property that is now the park, decided to remove the dam—the one that Caleb Akin built, for his gristmill—and drain the lake.”

“There was a lake?”

“Right where the park is. Akin Lake. It provided the factories with their power. Without it, there was no way to run the hydraulics. They all shut down, and hundreds of factory workers had to leave the village.”

“But why would Browning drain the lake in the first place?”

“He said it was to prevent malaria. Nobody knew what caused malaria but they thought it had something to do with stagnant water and moist vegetation. But Bill says that he thinks it’s *really* because Browning was from an old patrician family, and he wanted to drive away the poor immigrants who were moving to Akinville to work in the factories.”

“What a dick.” He kisses the top of my head. “Want some food?”

Cooking is one of those activities from which I have been walled off, like a tipsy infant gated from hazardous areas of the house. In New York, my specialties were asparagus quiche and lobster ravioli with vodka sauce. Never particularly skilled in the wifely arts, I felt proud to stake out that one

little corner of domesticity. In the wake of my collapse, Owen cooks every Sunday, brewing a cauldron's worth of food that sustains us through the week in microwaved rations.

This is only one of the ways in which I have been subtly unsexed. I don't wear dresses or skirts anymore, but rather have assumed a uniform of shorts and boxy T-shirts that hang loosely in the places where my figure has hollowed out. And although our sex life continues its accustomed rhythm, I feel particularly distant in the act, like I am being projected into my body from another place. If Owen minds that he has been having sex with a hologram, he hasn't said anything.

After dinner we settle awkwardly onto the antique couch, our feet propped up on a nineteenth-century ottoman, and Owen says that he wishes that I could be more open with him. I feel like his internal clock must be running a bit fast. Usually this conversation pops up every two to three weeks, but it feels like only days since I was last subjected to it.

I reply with my accustomed answer, that I'm working on it. And aren't I? I see the therapist once a week. I do my exercises, guiding my mind through a series of mental gymnastics that are supposed to gradually reconfigure the way that I engage with the world. And I take my medicine, even though it has diluted me into a watery version of myself. I already told him that I was unhappy, that my projects seemed to be going nowhere, and I was afraid my life was collapsing before it had properly begun. What else does he want me to tell him—that sometimes I think our marriage was a mistake? That I worry constantly that he'll leave me, despite having no reason to think so? That I think he could have had—could *still* have—someone else, one of those small, peppy, uncomplicated blondes who are native to the local natural-foods store and the gym? Are those things that he really wants to hear?

A part of me believes, with a deluded religiosity, that if I never tell Owen that I'm imperfect, he'll never know. I'd do anything not to break that spell of adoration that manifests on his face when he looks at me, the kind of pure, unselfish love that I guiltily suspect I am incapable of matching.

So I resort to my tried-and-true strategy, pivoting the conversation by telling him about the forest, the factory, the wooden angel, and its

mysterious give-and-take offerings. He seems satisfied by this, even touched to be allowed entry to this minor episode of my private life. This is how I keep his expectations low—first denying him everything, then parceling out superficial anecdotes like they are treasures. In the moment, I can even fool myself into thinking that this shallow representation, this tissue-paper person, is me.

For the rest of July, a new gravestone emerges about once a week. Among the weeds beside the stone wall, *Sarah Green/Born March 7, 1789/Died August 19, 1856.* In the section in which I am preparing to plant cauliflower, *Katharine McKinney/Wife of Thomas McKinney/who died/September 16, 1867/Ae. 40 years 3 months 2 days.* Beneath the pansies, which I have torn up in pursuit of more gravestones, *Michael O'Brian/Died January 4, 1869/Aged 35 years* and *Mary Drummond/Born May 1, 1862/Died October 11, 1871.*

Louisa and Bill—and Owen, on weekends—have volunteered to help me in systematically desecrating our yard, scraping through dirt and roots and worms and stones in pursuit of its telltale heart. One murky Saturday, we uncover the stones of Thomas McKinney, Joseph Leggett, and Alice Leggett. I have mapped the property on a piece of graph paper, where I record the coordinates of each marker before we prop it up against the side of the house. By the end of the month our collection numbers twelve. We have matched two to obituaries in the local paper, *The Tattersall Recorder*: Thomas McKinney, who died after his arm was mangled in a textile machine, and Michael O'Brien, who drowned in Akin Lake. We suppose that these deaths were reported because they were accidents, while the majority—struck down by mundane afflictions—weren't considered newsworthy.

In August, the bones come. The first is a white nub, just a few inches long, that could easily be mistaken for a chicken bone. Owen cracks open his old osteology textbook to confirm that it is in fact a human metatarsal. A talus bone—part of the ankle—follows shortly after. When the tibia emerges, slicing out of the dirt like a machete against the force of Louisa's trowel, Bill puts down his shovel and announces that it is time to call the

cops. The law, he says, requires the discovery of human remains to be reported to the local medical examiner.

It is in this conversation that I discover that Bill is the village's former chief of police. Dr. Sarles—the slim, middle-aged woman in a navy jacket and brown corduroys who arrives at the old white house several hours after a pair of officers have cordoned off the area—greets him warmly, inquires after his family, and responds with quiet effusion when he inquires after hers. Then she briskly sheds her social persona, dons a pair of blue latex gloves, and squats beside the square meter of ground where the grass is peeled back to reveal the sparse array of cracked bones.

While she works, I pepper Bill with questions. Can Dr. Sarles tell how old the person was and how he or she died? Might she be able to tell where the person was born or looked like? My mind dredges up vague recollections of a *National Geographic* article featuring a bleached white skull from some distant epoch, smothered with clay to reconstitute its features.

Bill shakes his head. "All she cares about is whether the bones are forensic—whether they show evidence of a crime."

A few photographs are taken, and the handful of bones plucked delicately and placed into a plastic box—disturbingly similar in appearance to a takeout container—to be brought back to the laboratory. I conjure an image of overhead lights gleaming lushly over scrubbed metal surfaces, rows of beakers and test tubes, the melody of centrifuges whirring softly in the background. Despite what Bill says, I hold out the hope that Dr. Sarles will be able to help us match the remains to a name.

Two weeks later, a police officer arrives at my door with a formal-looking letter, which states that the bones were deemed to be *historical, not forensic, belonging to nineteenth-century cemetery documented by village historian William Keating*.

Under his arm, he holds the same white takeout box. Its contents rattle dully as he hands it to me.

"What am I supposed to do with these?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It's your property."

Throughout August and September, I continue my weekly ritual, beginning with a walk through the village, which my research is gradually rendering legible. I begin by passing Washington's Rock and cross the ruins of the old mill dam. I cut through the park, the squelching of my feet in the long grass bearing noisy testimony to its former life as Akin Lake. I pass the succession of churches on Main Street, the line of oaks outside the library that were planted to commemorate the village's World War I dead, and the Tattersall House, a slanted edifice that once claimed a basement speakeasy. My course reiterates a mile and a half of the journey taken by Rochambeau's troops in July 1781 as they marched from Newport, Rhode Island, to Yorktown, Virginia, where they secured the Patriots' final victory.

As I cross the bridge over the railroad and onto Mortimer Avenue, I notice a marked shift in the demography of the village. The hills and outskirts of Tattersall are colonized by the lily-white bourgeoisie, the Patagonia-clad exurbanites who drove their Volvos out of the city to buy three-bedroom houses and raise packs of children and Labradors. In the center of the village, however, where the valley bottoms out, the residents are primarily Latinos: teenage couples strolling hand in hand, mothers shepherding flocks of small children, young men in ten-gallon hats and cowboy boots standing with their backs slanted against the outer walls of downtown stores. It takes two weeks of hashing out the correct phrasing in my head, and then two blustering half attempts, before I ask Louisa about it.

"You thought Westchester was all upper crust, didn't you?" she says. "Well, who do you think does the landscaping and cleans the houses on those big estates? They started coming here in the last few years, and I'd guess that most of them are illegal. You know, I don't mind them, but I wish they would at least *try* to have their children learn English. They have them all in separate Spanish classrooms in school, so they don't assimilate like the Italians and the Irish did."

I open my mouth in a reflex of rebuttal that I quickly realize I have neither the words nor the energy to defend. So I marinate in the awkward silence for a moment, then suggest we continue our work on the census. We now have a folder on each of the people of the cemetery, in which we collect the trickle of details as they emerge. Thomas McKinney and

Michael O'Brian worked in factories. Joseph Leggett was a farm laborer. The McKinneys had five children, the Leggetts eight. Sarah Green was blind. All but two were born in Ireland. None owned any real estate.

Every so often I ask myself why I walked the miserable humid miles to the historical society in the first place, at a time when I cared barely enough to run a comb through my hair or to shower more than once a week (Louisa and Bill must have really loved me in those early encounters). The only explanation that seems to fit is that it was the expression of an instinct, something more deeply hardwired than the grinding tasks of daily living, because it was entwined with my identity. And even as that identity seemed to be wasting away, my muscle memory guided me through its primordial motions, my mind doing hardly anything, and suspecting nothing, as I was compelled back to life.

The Catholic Church, built in 1932 to replace the one that burned in 1914, is a looming gray stone fortress that occupies a central corner of the village. After weeks of deferring my requests, Father Lowry has agreed to meet with me in its adjoining rectory. His small wood-paneled office overlooks the garden, freshly planted with zinnias and concentric loops of that wrinkly greenish-purple ornamental cabbage.

I was raised by an ex-Catholic and an ex-Presbyterian in a casually atheist household tinted with ancestral Quakerism, and spent my childhood and college years among secular Jews. I am acutely aware that I lack the social template with which to engage with Father Lowry. It seems unbearably strange to call him *Father*, but as the alternative is the willfully incorrect *Mr. Lowry* or the mortally familiar *Bob*, I manage to eke out the words.

Though I feel like I have discharged three job interviews' worth of sweat and have had to excuse myself to the bathroom two mortifying times before we even reach his office, the meeting is bluntly anticlimactic, lasting no more than five minutes.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Mitchell, but I'm afraid I can't offer you much help," he says, tenting his fingers ceremoniously on his desk while his eyes pulse out a granite disinterest between the white flashes of light on his glasses. "No

one in my congregation knows about any Catholic cemetery before Oakwood. I even called Father Neal at the nursing home—he was the priest here before me—and he didn't know anything."

"Do you think anyone in your congregation would like to help the historical society? We've been discussing it, and we'd like to put the gravestones back where they were, you know, standing upright. We've been talking about enlisting a professional archaeologist, if we can find one—someone who could use a technique, a kind of radar, to find the rest of the gravestones and map the locations of the graves without digging. We don't want to disturb any more bones."

"Yes, that sounds like a good plan," he says, his words vacant of both feeling and an answer to my question, so that I am forced to grind the conversation onward.

"So, um, if your congregation would be interested …"

"I'll let you know."

Heading back to the old white house, I complete my habitual loop: walking up Newberry Avenue through the dense golden sunlight, then slipping into the welcome respite of the cool, dark forest path. It's the first week of October, and although the point of the thermometer still sticks obstinately in the eighties, the woolly edges of the air are starting to sharpen. Over the past months, the wood-carver and I have faithfully maintained our exchange. I have left a jade hair barrette, a smooth freckly stone from our trip to Acadia, a vintage edition of *Jane Eyre*, a small oval box from Hancock Shaker Village, crates of my homegrown tomatoes (carefully sealed to prevent the ravages of squirrels), an Egyptian cat figurine from the Metropolitan Museum, a Fair Isle scarf that I knitted clumsily from a pattern, and a milky-blue soda bottle bearing the imprint *Rudolph Boehmer/ Tattersall, NY* (one of three we found in the attic, dated by Bill's research to the 1870s).

In return, the wood-carver has given me an otter, a bear, a turtle, a bobcat, an owl, a raven, an opossum, and a turkey—all species, Owen points out, native to the local forests, though I have seen hardly any in person. Bound by my own generalized apprehension and, to a degree I don't

like to admit, Louisa's enigmatic warning, I have never strayed off the path—but my curiosity about the wood-carver is growing.

"Do you think it's someone who lives in Akinville?" I ask Owen. "A reclusive artist, maybe?"

"Maybe. You could try asking some of the artsy people around town."

As I discover, Tattersall does have a sizable artist community, and at a reception for one of the historical society's public programs, Bill introduces me to two of them: Jane, the president of the village Arts Council, and Laurie, who owns an art gallery on Newberry Avenue. Do they know of any local wood-carvers? As their heads shake, Bill suggests that the carver might be the Leatherman.

"Who's the Leatherman?" I ask.

"Oh, he's an old local legend. No one knows where he came from, but he's been walking the same fifty-mile circuit through the Hudson Valley every week for years. And you know the name, Leatherman—that's because he wears a handmade suit all of leather, with a leather hat, boots, and bag. A strange character—no one's ever heard him speak, except for a few stray words of French."

Seeing the fascination dawn on my face, Louisa cuts in, slapping Bill lightly on the shoulder as he breaks into laughter.

"For God's sake, Bill," she says, "would you stop yanking her chain?"

"I get it," I say. "The Leatherman's just a myth."

"Oh no, he's real," says Louisa, "but he died over a hundred years ago. They've got photos of him and a pair of his old boots over at the local history museum."

One Saturday afternoon, Owen and I visit the museum, housed in an annex of the village hall. The Leatherman is just as Bill described in a photograph dated to 1885: a hulking figure in a patchwork leather suit, a wrinkly leather hat that he holds in one hand, a wooden staff in the other, and a leather satchel by his side. The slabs of leather are lashed together with stitches the size of shoestrings, like a crudely made Frankenstein. His thick, dark curls and dense beard form a nest of hair that encloses his rutted features. His slanted eyes, caught inside a cat's cradle of creases and lines, convey an enigmatic combination of hardness, vigilance, and intelligence.

"Maybe it's the Leatherman," I say, "leaving carvings for me."

"It's not the Leatherman."

"Maybe it's the *ghost* of the Leatherman."

Owen gives me a droll smile, then slings his arm around my shoulders. I have learned to resist the urge to yank myself out of my body as soon as he does so. Instead, I try to lounge in the moment, to feel the weight of his touch and the weight of my bones and the blanketing sensation of the air-conditioning that courses around us in the dark little room. In these inching ways, I have started to repopulate my skin.

One Saturday in late October, five of us are huddled around a gravestone. Louisa and Bill hold the stone in place as Eduardo and Delfina pour the cement. We watch it spill in like thick gruel, then wait for it to settle.

Eduardo and Delfina are two of Father Lowry's congregants who have answered our call to reconstruct the cemetery. They have no ancestral bond to the people buried here, as they immigrated from Guatemala just a few years ago, but they both said they felt a calling to help.

There are others, about a dozen in total, forming a different constellation of faces every week. Some are older residents with Italian or Irish surnames, quilted faces, and surprisingly agile limbs. The younger ones are mostly Guatemalan. Some bring their children, who regard me with a kind of creeped-out deference as the Cemetery Lady and fulfill my requests to fetch a trowel or a bucket of water with exhilarated obedience.

Eduardo lives on Mortimer Avenue, just a few houses down from the historical society, and works as a waiter in a Greek restaurant on Main Street. His head barely rises above my own, but his limbs have an iron muscularity, and he hoists the marble grave markers as though they were made of cardboard. When we find a bone—as we do, every so often, in the process of setting the stones—he traces a cross over his chest and says a mumbling prayer before we rebury it. His son Luis, too young to help, toddles around the perimeter of the flower bed that I have replanted in a circle around the first stone that we reset, that of Alexander Rooney.

When the cement has hardened, I hear Eduardo and Bill laughing about something Louisa said earlier—a throwaway remark about the Mexican

border that made me cringe, though I said nothing. While Louisa generally regards Eduardo and Delfina with a wan friendliness, her eyes narrow whenever the two of them speak to each other in Spanish, as though sensing the blossoming of a conspiracy. Delfina acts as though she doesn't hear Louisa's comments, most of which are strategically oblique, allowing for plausible deniability in the event that she is challenged (which she never is). But Eduardo likes to repeat what Louisa says when she's out of earshot, mimicking her voice in a singsong falsetto. He regards her with a wry affection, calling her *abuela*.

I still worry that Delfina is hurt, however, so I tell her not to listen. "Louisa has all sorts of goofy ideas. I've been walking the path through the woods for months, but when I first got here she made it seem like some sort of death trap."

"That's probably because those woods are full of *illegals*," says Eduardo.

Met by my blank stare, he continues, "You know, immigrants. The ones who can't make rent, so they go live in the woods."

"You mean they're out there *now*?"

"They are every summer. Of course, when the weather gets bad, they'll have to go—to one of the shelters, back to Guatemala, or they'll freeze to death. You haven't been here for a winter yet, have you, Cemetery Lady? It's not good."

I report Eduardo's comments to Owen that night. My therapist has deemed it safe for me to cook under supervision, and Owen watches as I slice onions and barrage him with questions simultaneously. Does he think that the wood-carver is an immigrant living in the forest? Could it be someone I've seen around the village, a parishioner at the church, one of our volunteers? Is he one of the young men who wait beside the train station early each morning, hoping to be picked up for a day's labor by a landscaping truck?

"Maybe we should leave a note," I say. "Eduardo could help me write it in Spanish."

"And say what? *Are you an immigrant?*"

"It's getting cold, Owen. What is he—or she—going to do then?"

“I don’t know, El. Eduardo said there are shelters. Do you want to ask him to move in with us?”

In a burst of frustration, I drop the knife into the sink. The satisfying clang it makes serves to camouflage the noisiness of the silence between us, in which the stubborn reality is reverberating: *I don’t know what to do any more than you do.*

Over the next weeks, I become strategic in my offerings. I leave another scarf, then a hat, then a sweater that I knitted in several marathon sessions. Not knowing the size or gender of the recipient, I err on the side of large and boxy. The carver responds with a Canada goose, a coyote, and a fox—all animals that migrate for the winter.

One morning when I wake up, the air has turned over, revealing its cool underbelly. The panes of our bedroom window are cobwebbed with frost. Looking through them to the garden, I see that the tops of the gravestones—all fifteen, standing in neat rows—are capped by thin crescents of snow.

My notes on the families of the Catholic cemetery sit in a drawer of the desk in the guest room, untouched for nearly a month. In their place are fat sheaves of new papers—newspaper clippings and illustrations and broadsides documenting the factories and businesses of nineteenth-century Tattersall.

Since the historical society suspended its meetings for the season, my visits to the forest have become more sporadic. As I lace up my duck boots, I realize that it has been over a month since I last exchanged offerings. The hat and scarf that I slip on are exact replicas of the ones I knitted for the wood-carver. Whenever I leave the house, I scour the streets for the sight of a person wearing them, without success.

I head out the door, past Washington’s Rock and the rubble of Akin’s mill, luminous beneath its shawl of snow. When I reach the tree, a chilled vacancy is hanging in the air, as though the substance of every molecule has just been flushed clean.

I crouch next to the hollow, and that’s when I see them: all of the offerings that I have made, from the pile of lenses to the pair of gloves that I

deposited last month, in neat piles like presents on Christmas morning. The only things missing are the tomatoes; the empty boxes sit in their place.

The angel is still there. Frost has set into the grooves and along the edges of the wood, piped in thin lines like white icing. Placed into the cleft of a branch just below it is a wooden otter, its small paws curled inward, its long body arched to form a loop.

I take the otter in my hand, then jump to my feet so quickly that I dip into orthostasis. A swarm of white stars momentarily blanches my vision, then disperses in a million different directions. My gaze tracks them frantically, as though in the buzzing movement of a single gleaming speck I might catch a glimpse of the wood-carver, scurrying out of sight. I rotate on my heels once, twice, spinning on a tilted axis on the frozen ground. Then I spring from the path and take off into the heart of the forest. I walk for an hour, pacing the bed of leaves that have grown hard and unyielding in the cold, until my hands are numbed and my coat sleeve is stiffened with the continuous trail of slime I have been wiping from my nose. Fortunately, the forest is small, bracketed by the village on all sides. When I come to one end, I stumble out onto the street beside the hospital. Charting a perpendicular path, I race through until I emerge at the grocery store parking lot.

As I cut a series of straight lines, dissecting the forest systematically, I discover many things: a baby's shoe, with a rubber sole and plaid canvas upper; dozens of scattered empty beer bottles and cans; a blue tarp, a small yellow bucket, a green watering can; countless golf balls (where is the golf course?); a rusted hammer; a broken flowerpot; an eviscerated mattress, spilling its guts of ragged stuffing and tangled springs; a syringe half filled with brown syrup; and bricks—bricks in piles and mounds, bricks stacked into pyramids and cairns, pouring out of the gnarled sockets of upturned trees, and tumbling into the river where they form makeshift paths and serendipitous dams; bricks pulverized into a fine dust that swells with the provocation of my footsteps and lingers in the air, tracing my path through the forest in long cords of lowly hovering red clouds.

These artifacts are distributed widely; there is no discernible pattern to them, nothing that gives the impression of a discrete living area, although

there are several spots that I ineffectively craft into camps in my mind, looking for comfortable places on which to lay my head, choosing hideaways in which to store my precious belongings, and calculating convenient proximities to the stream. I even discover a brace of boulders, shaped into a shelf with a shady alcove beneath, which I envision as one of the Leatherman's rock shelters—but aside from a shallow crust of old leaves and a few brushwood tumbleweeds, it's empty.

If there was nothing there—absolutely nothing—I might feel a sense of closure. In the seemingly random, meaningless scatter of things, which hint but do not reveal, there is a tantalizing openness, a portal that refuses to be shut. In my mind I am still searching for a coherent thread with which to lace together the discordant bits of evidence, sifting through faces on the street, as though I might bring the pieces together with Sherlockian precision, and know all there is to know. But the truth is that I know even less about the carver than I do about Alexander Rooney. Both exist on a plane of existence that is separate, yet parallel, to mine. Some remote cosmic spasm jogged us into alignment, then just as quickly wrenched us apart again. Now where I look for them there is an absence like an empty tomb. Like a gravestone without a body. A shoe without a foot. A million lenses scattered and glittering on the forest floor, a galaxy of glass stars, fading into the dark.

Three Poems

Bin Ramke

ASBESTOS AND ITS CURIOUS DANGER

> *In the Middle Ages, supposed to be salamanders' wool; another old name for it in English was fossil linen (18c.). Prester John, the emperor of India, and Pope Alexander III were said to have had robes or tunics made of it.*
>
> —Etymonline.com

An amorous mixture
of exotic and ordinary, a rock

woven fibrous into
potholders and flame-proof suits.

An act of touch—the dare of curiosity—
the sense of touch or taste or tenderness

of the infant informed foretold
mortal memory *noli me tangere*

momentary sense, tense
in its eager return-wish, hand to flame

to return to earth a sacrifice
(burning to know, o curious care)

of desire versus not-desire
contentment contained:

pleasure is a staleness like virtue

not virtue as strength but virtue

versus, curious about the flame's
affection flesh we felt

the world bare
and drink minerals of an evening

when tendrils tend to rise
from the surface, breathable,
picturesque, then gone, vaporish
like fire a song sold.

Having researched the kindling temperature
of flammables, we devised a test of nerve

as children one poured lighter
fluid in his palm, the other

set it aflame it might not hurt
then again it might.

THE LIKE OF LOOKS LIKE

1.

While I mourned at her bedside
I also wanted to know
what it was to die—not was like,
but was. I needed to document.

What I like, taking pictures

I cringe when I think of pain
When I feel pain I feel pain

That morning the mountains felt close
The clouds floating
The twelve-spotted skimmer floating
A tinkling stream weedy out the window

Color causes pain in time
Like was an adjective, “be pleasant”
To take a picture is violence

Theft is property
I own my own thieving
which was a camera flash her face …

2.

From the imagery of curious Lucretius on the nature of things:

Light like oxen: *the sun’s light and his heat, because they are made of minute elements, which are as it were beaten with knocks, and do not hesitate to pass through the intervening air when struck by the blow of that which follows; for instantly light comes up behind light, and flash is pricked on by flash, as in a long team …* 4:186–190

Or: *since a shape handled in the dark is known to be the same as that seen in clear light by day, it must be that touch and sight are moved by a like cause.* 4:230–233

Or, the face I touched was touched by light,
I could see and know and mourn.

3.

A child who learns to touch with
a braille-like confidence in what is there
and what is not lies against death

between waking and dreaming
when the very blankets warmed
by the child's body are so like
a mother, equilibrium of

temperature, temperament,
that the whole world touchingly
conspires rhythmically like a lung.

4.

I like to take pictures with telephones.
Like a camera a machine to keep
a voice or any sound within a room
within which secrets adhere to walls
like mildew after a flood, coloring
the future which is a memory,
a likely memory of catastrophe.

5.

It looks like rain, my mother said,
and it did.

6.

How her breath sounded:
Kussmaul, Cheyne-Stokes
Biot's respiration, ataxic
agonal
like sounds like
in the end.

I did take her picture, digital death mask
like Proust's like Napoleon's
like Mary, Queen of Scots's
like DanteBlakeKeats's like alike.

7.

But to draw close to a death
is not to know—unless to one's
own death, not even a mother's.
I know no more now
than then; curiously less.

WHY WE LIVE WHERE WE LIVE

> *Plots of these stars' velocities have swoops, arches, and spirals indicating patches of stars that are moving together. If the Milky Way were in equilibrium, and hadn't been recently perturbed, those patterns wouldn't appear. That they do indicates that something has shaken up the stars recently enough that their orbits haven't relaxed back to a stable state yet.*
>
> —Leah Crane, *New Scientist*, April 30, 2018

A small dog eats grass then runs
for no clear reason but to an observer
with a will and with intent.

Observers want to know, cannot
accept the mere, the more or less
unreasoned romp; die of curiosity, we say.

Hers is a philosophy of dirt, and of perturbation,
and she is given a name which is odd.
"Pet" is an English word of unknown origin.

I have watched animals under the sun
and under starlight they are not the same.

*

At night she sleeps and dreams
but offers no hint (a word related to hunt
which indicates a pack of hounds).

To understand movement one
must be still for long.
We would know the difference
but we cannot find the boundary,
unlike dogs at the fence
separating themselves like gravel at a sieve,
big ones left behind barking,
small ones slipping through spaces …

the boundary is never where we are looking
but is often where we are standing, hopeless.

*

Did only primates develop an astronomy?
We know of dung beetles' use of the stars,
which counts. We know of birds
whose children make initial flights
thousands of miles from home
with no instruction but knowing
the shapes stars make when viewed
from here. That counts. Observers
are curious to know. Which
else among the denizens
of this ground we walk on makes a science
of starlight? When William Herschel
sat in the dark garden looking

through the lenses he himself
had ground, his sister sat
at her desk at a far window noting
his messages sent by string—one sharp
pull meant angle of declination,
two quick meant …
one long pull meant …

this to protect his eyes from the light
of her lamp. She took his notes.
She was so small
and full of her own science.
Her eyes could have filled
with her own comets.
Teardrop-shape.

> *The following three reasons motivated the representation of a soil profile: to explain the resurrection of the dead, to display the roots, and to show ploughing.*
>
> —*Encyclopedia of Soil Science*, "Soil in Art"

From within comes a living layer
maybe like a dream, sandy, damp
and dangerous. My little dog knows,
while digging, me. Admire

in a cave in France paint made of earth
on rock walls—they made a copy
nearby and many humans look.

I like "to display the roots." Dis-
play. Deploy. Bring to light. Bright
engagement of the tubular tangle …

plicare, pleat, unpleat, explicate,
explicit. But one could have reached
manually into the dirt to trace

roots from the plant into the scatter.
Oh, and I read that trees at night
might breathe, very slowly but

measurably; not breathe but draw
fluid upward, a kind of contraction
of the cambium. An exchange process

in the dark. My little dog
dug there, in starlight,
mole-like, happy. I watch her incuriosity
as a release, a respite.

What the artist made: molecularly
whittled seismic soil vexed concavities.

> *The manner in which we sense the world remains forever incomplete and ambiguous because we always experience things from a particular point of view or relationship. The body is open to the world but things are always hidden from it.*
>
> —Christopher Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone*

Desperate for air pushed
by wind breath between breaths
hazarding a life with remaining years
he aged as best he could, less

disguising himself as himself he walked
along the paths trying to place
one foot half on the paving half
on the grass or sandy edge
for no reason except focus

having recently learned of leaf
beetles who disguise themselves
as the bite marks they make
he tried to, not to, tried

to leave no trace intractable

in passivity. He knew his place.
He had no place, which he knew
as honorable. The wind moved
his accumulations
cloud-like

before his feet dust risen
rising even as the sole slid
along the edge. There is
no edge there is only
change, another word for age.

No one watched. I find this
curious, how many aged men
go unwatched in the world,
go and live and linger
and no one watching wonders why.

The seasons change as they will
we have changed them unwitting
it is warm now when once was
cold is a place of small creatures
no song where once birds sang.

We watched a sheet of plastic
the color of watched wind
roll down a street into cylindrical
fabric-like lacy light shifting
against pavement like handling

beauty arisen from foam
as foam or wave as
particle persistent rhythmic
as force of wind unwinding.
Beauty is not the word we want

symmetry is better but wrong

*

where is the division consider
a line on one side of which is
not what is on the other.
Is this the best is this a little
life lived? Consider the lilies

who neither toil nor spin
who wither and die and return
according to encoded instructions,
written and read internally,
all is poem, all is reading
reasoned and reductive.

A Visit to Frederik Ruysch's Cabinets

Diane Ackerman

Late one afternoon, fog encapsulated the city of Amsterdam, muffling the canals in a quiet so introspective the streets seemed merely to be dreaming of pedestrians. Maria hurried to meet Frederik Ruysch at his cabinet of curiosities on Bloemgracht, excited finally to see it, when she thought she heard someone behind her and turned around to find no person but a strangely lit crowd of vapors drifting across the canal, not exactly fog, and mumbling, it seemed.

She hadn't had much food all day, and had worked hard collecting insects on the outskirts of town. Maybe the figments were summoned by her starved senses in the fog, trying to navigate when the usual landmarks were missing. Lacking stimuli, surely an exhausted brain might feed on itself. She didn't care. The phantoms could be mystical, or deluding quirks of nature like echo or mirage, but to her senses they felt real. As real as the unpainted watercolors that sometimes floated in her mind's eye.

Frederik Ruysch's cabinet of curiosities was a family operation. For a small admission fee, one of his daughters would give tours to the general public, and after hours he held classes there for physicians, midwives, and other medical professionals. By the time Maria arrived, she was in good spirits, and ready to view his famous collection of wonders, and from the moment she entered the building, she knew she was in a strange new landscape, a small cameo of creation.

The number and variety of his "wet preparations" were daunting—a dozen shelves held large glass jars in which specimens dangled from nearly invisible horsehairs, allowing them to be viewed from all sides. In one jar, a floating human hand cradled a hatching reptile, topped by dried corals, butterflies, and flowers. In another, an embryo held in its hand a bundle of lymph vessels.

Entering the room quietly, to avoid startling her, Frederik saw her gasp and place one open palm on her chest, fingers spread, as if she needed to hold her heart in. It was a common reaction from first-time visitors, including the hand on the chest, a pattern that both intrigued and amused him.

"I removed that from a body more than twenty-five years ago," he said quietly.

She turned with a start, and laughed at being caught like that, viewed while she was viewing his specimens, as if she herself were but his latest acquisition.

"And inflated and preserved them," he continued, as he drew up beside her and pointed out details, "in such a way that all the tiny valves—*here, here, and here*—are clearly visible. What a lot of trouble beautiful things can be!"

In another jar sat a very small four-footed animal that had supposedly been regurgitated by a seventy-eight-year-old woman. That was followed by small toothy fish amid sheep intestines. Each jar seemed stranger than the one before, with all the items floating in exceptionally clear alcohol—quite a costly investment—and sealed with a thick layer of smeared resin, with pig's bladder applied over the resin to keep the seals airtight. Sometimes Frederik also covered the jars with intestines or human skin.

"I tried several techniques," he said, his eyes drifting to the left as he pictured them. "And I finally decided that all made equally good lids."

Maria wasn't sure what to say. "All the lids are red," she thought matter-of-factly, without realizing that she'd said so out loud.

"Yes, because I've injected the vessels in those membrane seals with a waxy fluid that I invented—it looks more decorative, I think. Not only pleasing to the eye but useful as well for those who wish to observe the precise flow of these arteries."

In some cases he'd also tied a red velvet ribbon around the top as a decorative touch.

"So much time and work went into preparing each of these specimens; you've no idea," he said, sighing.

“But how fresh and alive they look,” she said, leaning in closer to both the specimen and Frederik.

“Ah, well, there’s much to be gained by the useful application of obsession! I’ve also begun cataloging everything, starting with the lowest shelf in the first room on the first floor. I’m nothing if not methodical. That’s one word for it anyway!”

Next he led his curious visitor to a small room, whose centerpiece was a walnut pedestal covered in little stones of various sizes and hues, some dull and almost round, others with an odd sheen, some quite jagged. She tilted her head and studied it hard for a moment, as if that might help her construe the diorama.

“What exactly am I looking at?” she asked at last.

“These,” he said excitedly, “are bladder, kidney, and gallstones. I removed a few of them from an eighty-year-old woman. Some of the other stones were passed in urine and some I took from corpses. There’s even one here somewhere—now which one is it?—that was coughed up by a man who had a lot of trouble swallowing, and he coughed it right out at me! Two of the larger ones—there,” he said, pointing to a couple of irregular stones, “came from the breast of a very old woman. And that one”—he pointed to a tiny pale gray stone—“came from the urinary duct of a four-year-old girl, poor thing. It caused her death, I’m afraid. Such pain she must have gone through.” He winced. “That’s very disturbing.”

Branching blood vessels were woven through the heap of stones, and atop that little stage stood the skeleton of a four-month-old fetus, holding a string of pearls in its right hand, which it looked at thoughtfully, as if to ask, “Why should I care about ornaments?” Next to it stood a similar one of roughly the same age, but in this fetus’s right hand, dangling by a barely visible hair, were chalky white stones removed from the joints of an old gout-stricken man. But in its left hand the fetus held a membrane handkerchief to its eye socket, as though it were weeping about the sufferings humans must endure. A third fetal skeleton held a scythe in its right hand. And a little banner reminded viewers: *Man, born of woman, lives but briefly and has many weaknesses. Death spares no one, not even defenseless babes.*

“And here,” he said, drawing her attention to another walnut pedestal, “we have the skeleton of a girl of three. Just look at the extreme whiteness of the bones! And you can see, I think, where I’ve joined all the parts by their natural ligaments. That was a lot of work on my part, I can tell you. It took all of my spare time for more than a week,” he said, savoring the memory.

He was clearly in his element, Maria thought, and also at a considerable distance from his material. Otherwise, she couldn’t imagine his being able to stage such disturbing tableaux. He seemed serious but quite cheerful as he spoke about them.

Another composition featured three tiny skeletons playing musical instruments, with the middle one holding part of a damaged thighbone in lieu of a violin, a second beating time against its head with a bone stick, and a third playing a cello that appeared to be one part of the sacroiliac. A feather headdress sat next to a spear made of the hardened vas deferens of an adult male. Next to that, a girdle of sheep intestines encircled what appeared to be a ram’s horns nested in brilliant green lichen. Beside that lay a small silver fish with a pointed snout and exceptionally long, sharp teeth, followed by all manner of decoratively jarred body parts, being held by preserved infant hands.

Every room in his curiosity cabinet was a self-contained tabernacle of art, a tiny museum in itself with its centerpiece an anatomical still life on a bed of stones quarried from bladder, kidneys, or gall bladder. Out of that bed arose trees of branching blood vessels filled with red liquid, and entwined in that thicket stood tiny fetal skeletons, symbolizing the fleetingness of life, all arranged with the artistry, playfulness, and pride that collectors of rarities usually brought to their expanses of shells, minerals, wildlife, and ancient relics. But Frederik was the first to set human anatomical wonders on center stage.

Maria had no idea what to say, what to express, or precisely what to feel. Impressed by the intense labor, skill, and imagination that must have gone into creating these dioramas? Shocked? Faint? Fascinated in an objective, professional way? One fetal skeleton was so arranged as to be clearly laughing. Surely that had been difficult to engineer. Frederik’s artistry was

plain. The moral messages were admirable. And his enthusiasm was unequaled for this massive, sprawling, multifloored, many-roomed cabinet of curiosities, in which he was perhaps the most curious specimen of all—that is, the specimen of his own omnivorous curiosity. The cabinet contained all the usual animals, plants, minerals, and anthropological rarities, but also human rarities, on the same par, equally odd and wondrous, inviting fearless study. It was as if he were a visitor from another planet who had come to earth exploring and collecting, returning home now with all the oddities he'd compiled to study and catalog. She smiled tenderly. There was something endearing about his resolve to soften the shock many people would feel in seeing human viscera on display in jars. His artful designs allowed all but the faintest hearts entrance to the mystery, and a way of perceiving his exhibits almost without horror. Almost. Not quite. She was shocked by his manipulation of the dead—was it heartless of him? No, his eyes had watered when he'd described the suffering of the little girl who died from a stone trapped in her urinary tract. He was clearly moved, deeply, by the lives and stories of the people whose parts he preserved. She had known in general about his collection, that it included human body parts among all the other fascinating arcana, but nothing prepared her for actually seeing it. And this was only the first room!

Most visitors moved slowly, timidly, through the exhibits, and some left after the first room. He hoped Maria would absorb the reverence and wonder he brought to the collection. It was macabre—not to his eyes, but so he'd been told—and even a bit shocking to some medical people. Her quiet perusal didn't disappoint him. That was usual for first-time visitors, who might not always like what they saw, but always left not only awed by his craft but with a richer sense of themselves as life-forms.

"You know," he said, "now that I think about it, no visitor has ever stayed long enough to see my whole collection!"

"I'm not surprised!" Maria laughed uneasily. "Everything everywhere," she said, turning slowly in a circle, "is unique. There's almost no background. The eye catches on everything, so each alcove takes time to properly explore."

“And to slowly digest,” he said. “I know that can be a bit overwhelming at first, and I don’t mean to disturb you, madam.”

He normally showed guests dozens of shelves, drawers, and boxed specimens, as well as hundreds of glass jars containing the body parts of children, each specially treated to look plump cheeked and lifelike.

“Oh, no, you *do* mean to disturb,” she corrected him. “This is extraordinary artistry, but it’s not designed like still lifes just to be beautiful.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, of course,” he said, thinking that he liked the way she contradicted him, with respect and attention. Not just recoiling and keeping peace by ignoring much of what he said—his wife’s habit. To be fair, they’d been married so long that his stories and ideas had grown stale to her. All the more reason, and fun, to deploy them with this willing companion.

“It’s an unusual art form and science, I admit, an acquired taste. But much of it overlaps with your own studies, does it not?” He gestured into the hallway, where dozens of shadow boxes of various sizes held a colorful array of butterflies and moths.

“And some of it is designed to shock,” she said with a sly smile, “to provoke conflicting emotions, and make one rethink everything one is. Curiosity engendering more curiosity.”

He smiled. “You understand.”

“I’m trying to … I’d like to.”

“Let’s enjoy something wondrous and yet simple that’s a little less fraught perhaps.” He led her into a side room and smoothly slid out a velvet-lined drawer, from which he removed one of several horizontal glass pyramids.

“Mr. Newton’s prism….” Frederik slowly turned the pyramid in his hand, drawing his fingertips along the sharp edges, turning it gently until it captured a ray of sunlight.

“You’re taken by the way he splits light into the colors of the rainbow?” Maria asked.

“Oh, no, I like being able to create my *own* rainbows with them—six or eight or twelve of them if I want—all over the walls, twenty feet away,” he

said with a dramatic flourish of a hand, casting rainbows across the room.

"I see!"

He narrowed his eyes, picturing a single large rainbow across the skirt of her simple navy-blue dress.

"Or I could cast one onto a cliff or a boat hull. I can pick a rainbow right out of the air anytime I want! That's the collector's true art. Not just a discerning eye or an urge to accumulate and organize, but to make the lost, the rare, the invisible visible. Whenever he wants, so that nothing is ever lost."

Maria thought about the scope of his quest. "That's certainly powerful, godly even," she said, silently marveling at the hubris it must require. There was a certain swagger to his voice, and something else, endearing, a spirited playfulness.

"No, godly would be to mount a storm and gallop across the sky," he said, growing animated. "Splitting and casting colors that already exist, that's more benign. But it means I can capture nature on my own terms, subdue and localize it, tuck a prism into my pocket and cast a rainbow anywhere I please, and she can't repulse me or retaliate."

She. What an interesting slip of pronouns, Maria thought.

"It's a conquest perhaps?"

He laughed. "There's a thrill in acquisition. I don't deny it's not always easy to separate the object from the experience of getting it. You have to know what's available at any given time, not just the particulars you want. But surely you also feel a sense of conquest when you net a little butterfly?"

"First of all, they're not all that 'little,'" Maria said, a bit annoyed.

"Do forgive me," he said quickly. "I didn't mean to minimize. I hear some of the tropical species are a foot across, with long, dangling tails, and others flutter like the flags of nations!"

"And not quite *that* big! Not in nature. But, in my own private world, they're much larger. In my world they're certainly objects of wonder and beauty, but also keys to doors that wouldn't otherwise open for me. *Your* door, for instance."

He smiled and lifted his forefinger to his brow, as if he were tipping his hat to her.

She hesitated. There were social constraints with men who weren't family, but she'd encountered him in public several times over the past few months. And from their first meeting at Waltha, the Labadist commune he'd come to a year earlier, hoping to commission a watercolor of a luna moth from her, she'd felt uncommonly at ease with him.

"When I sell my paintings, I receive money, which buys me time and a bit more freedom. And I raise the caterpillars myself, which is very time-consuming. My God, the patience one needs! I often have to wait a whole year for a moth or butterfly to emerge! But, in the end, I can see deeper into nature's handiwork, deeper into the relationships between plants and animals, watch their behaviors entwine, and then all of them together into a single fabric of plant and animal and human too, one large mingling of creatures with quite different missions, all dependent on each other."

"Like a society."

"Of infinite families. And the butterflies' wings are beautiful separately, like little shards of color, but they're also like …"

She paused a moment, searching through her mental larder of images for a close enough comparison, and finally followed the word *shard* that had arisen out of who knew what corner of her memory.

"… panes of stained glass. Yes, like that. Separately, they're beautiful and quite small, even trivial, in size. But when they're viewed together in bright sunlight, they create something grander and even more awe-inspiring. So, you see, for me, they stay life-size on paper—I'm scrupulous about that—but some days they can seem much larger or smaller."

"Ah, when you put it that way," he said, nodding his head in thought. Although he hesitated to say so, they were magnified for him too.

"And do you actually believe that all the colors on earth come from that simple spectrum of seven colors?" Maria asked.

"I'd argue with the word 'simple.' Mixtures are never simple. Think of the mixture of male and female, and the complexity of the organism they give rise to."

"That's true," she said, "though I disagree with … But, forgive me, I'm getting ahead of myself."

“No, no, madam, go on. I’ve never had someone I could talk with so easily about these things. Most people find them too …”

His voice fell away as he sought the right word, but he didn’t need to complete the sentence. She knew the word was *strange*, and her nod implied that she understood.

“Well, I disagree with Mr. Newton about color,” she said. “There are shades in nature that can’t be made—not by me, at least—from those seven alone. And he chose seven because there are seven notes in a musical scale? Really? That makes no sense to me. Also, I find some colors are tinted by glare or cold or heat or shadow, and some in forests shed their own light. I find I must grind most of my own pigments to be pleased with the results.”

“You do? May I ask you to tell me more about your ingredients, and what binders you use?”

Looking at him askance, she slyly smiled. “No, sir, you may not!”

“Just so. I have no intention of telling you my embalming secrets either.”

“What if I happen to guess them?”

“Then, especially, I won’t tell you,” he said softly.

How charming she was. He remembered with a pang the exchange he’d had with his wife the day before. He had just received a long-sought honor, being elected to the Royal Society, and was cooing to himself with pride about it.

“In your wildest dreams,” he’d said to her, as they were dressing for dinner, “did you ever think your husband would receive such an honor?”

With a half smile, his wife had said: “Frederik, you do not appear in my wildest dreams.”

That stung.

His wife, though proud of their daughter Rachel’s artistry, was put off by his own unique medical studies and trove of rarities, including embryos and fetuses, and acute deformities, all of which she found macabre, repellent, and tedious. Her father had been an eminent architect, and she preferred beauty that was practical and an orderly home (in contrast to Frederik’s domain of a wide, three-story house on Bloemgracht, which held his dusty, crammed curiosity cabinets, workshops, and unnervingly fiendish tableaux). She wanted her life to be calm and amiable, but she only ever

seemed angry with him these days. Sometimes he knew why—a clear lapse of judgment on his part, a misspoken word, an unintended slight, too much time at work, a colleague or friend of his she didn't approve of, an extreme deformity for his collection that made her more uneasy about him than it—but most often there was nothing specific he could identify. Her disappointment with her life was palpable, an invisible aura that weighed on her. They hadn't been intimate for a long time, and their lives seemed to be curving farther and farther away from each other.

What would his life have been like married to a woman like Maria, he wondered. But then he wouldn't have fathered Rachel, the love of his life, who—impossibly, it seemed—had begun the same as the tiny fetuses in his collection, little more than a pale, blind seahorse. How did that sea creature become his beautiful daughter? What had she looked like as a fetus? And, if he had seen her then, as a seahorse fetus, would he have felt the same love? Mindful of his consuming passion for his collection, Rachel had stitched little cuffs and collars for the embalmed, preserved infants in his cabinets—a secret the two of them kept from his wife.

Reaching a jar down from a shelf, he said, "And here we have the Surinam toad, which you told me at Waltha was one of your favorites."

"Ah," Maria said as she peered through the glass and alcohol at two perfectly preserved female toads, one with the eggs clustered atop her back, the other with its back cut open to reveal where the young had burrowed beneath the flesh and would soon be bursting through the skin.

"I must say I do shudder when I think of the pain of bearing human offspring in that way," he said. "So many piercing the skin all at once!"

"Well, the Bible tells us that Eve was wrenched from Adam's rib." Maria eased into a mischievous smile. "Was that any less painful?"

She has a mind like a lamp, he thought. It gently illuminates whatever it settles on. At fifty-five, he knew he was in the youth of old age, and just when he wanted to think otherwise, to feel as vigorous as the image he saw in the wavering glass of storefront windows, some physical ailment or limitation would sorely remind him. It was that window self he pictured kissing Maria, sharing breath and unsaid words, exploring the hot cavern of her mouth, discovering the flavor of her being. Spiced by the emanations

from her skin and the air piped through her lungs. That appealed to him too. His sense of smell wasn't as keen as it had been in his younger days, when women had undertones and overtones, and different parts of a lover's body were like uniquely scented rooms. After he'd told his wife that, she'd sometimes scented her zones with different perfumes, just to excite him. Long gone days, he thought sadly. For several years, his wife had suffered from bouts of weak lungs and fatigue, an ailment without a name that he'd seen before, especially among women past childbearing age. It defied prognosis, and could be quite debilitating. When she was bedridden, their servants and children took shifts caregiving, though he tried to spare Rachel too many responsibilities. She needed enough time to pursue her painting, and she was already helping him with his cabinet displays. She intuited, and could stitch, just the right cuff, collar, and lace to soften the impact of the skeletons and embalmed heads and hands of young children on display. The memento mori messages had been her idea, lest moralists or neighbors complain.

Maria looked intently at the toad. "When I first saw this toad," she said, vividly picturing the moment in her mind's eye, "really studied it, I had an epiphany about the stages in its life. …"

Prancing violin music began abruptly in a parlor above them, and though it was fluent and melodic, the violinist played the same phrases repeatedly.

"What's this? Others above us?" she said. "Angels?"

"One of my daughters, Ann," he replied proudly.

"Is she practicing?"

"No, not really, she's *educating* the violin."

"Educating it?" Maria asked. "It sounds like a fully educated instrument to me!"

"Ah, but the violin remembers," he said. If you train it to make certain vibrations over and over, the wood absorbs and changes and begins to make those vibrations more fully and more easily."

"You mean it *learns* to sound beautiful."

"Yes."

"I hadn't thought of violins growing into their mellow sounds, or of objects being transformed by the people they know, just as for people some

relationships are mutually consequential. But it's a strange and exciting thought. Obvious in a way—I mean, I've certainly observed things gradually growing worn—but it's pleasing to think that the opposite may also be true, that a musical instrument may be improved for having known you. Maybe a favorite paintbrush too, in a way that encourages, or more easily allows, beauty."

"This chair," Frederik said, pulling a leather-upholstered desk chair toward him. "Well, look at it, see how the seat isn't even but leans back. It wasn't made that way. The others I have aren't tilted. It's become my favorite chair, though, and has been learning my weight and balance and the angle of my slouch for years now!"

Frederik thought about what she'd been saying before the music began, her epiphany about amphibians. He looked at her intensely with haunting gray-blue eyes, and said softly, "An epiphany, you realize, is a lonely thing."

His eyes held hers a moment longer than they really needed to. There was something polymorphously sexual about him, she realized, a fluid sexuality that somehow included all he collected, all the arcana of his world, and she found that strangely appealing. Could she add anything more to her busy life? An unexpected thought flitted through her mind: should I love again? Where had that come from? she wondered. It had been such a long while since she'd felt love's lamp warming her spine. Was she ready to have another child? Because one could easily follow. That was another matter entirely. At her age, she knew the risks of childbirth—about half of all women died during their reproductive years. Frederik's wife had nearly died trying to give birth to an eighth child. Also, having raised two children, Maria knew how much energy for her work she'd be giving up. Birth control methods were unreliable, aborticants dangerous. On the other hand, Frederik had said that his wife had been ill off and on for the past year. If he and Maria married after his wife's death, she'd end up adding his brood to her own anyway. She didn't want to think about all that, or think at all. Her physical hunger was too great to ignore. *Hunger.* She missed the feast of touch, and the sensation of fullness that follows, as if lovers somehow consume each other, drink from each other's well, which they in turn

replenish. It was no less a violent, physical need for connection than wild animals felt. Almost wolflike, eating into the other with kisses. Why was she even thinking about kisses?

So it begins, she thought, inasmuch as it has not already begun. It was time. And a bit frightening, because it was bound to be life changing. One thing about metamorphosis—in order for something new to appear, you have to shed parts of your old self. Sometimes comfortable parts.

It felt a little creepy being surrounded and watched by the eyes of so many fetuses. Frederik's own blue eyes had flecks of gold and brown, she noticed, and she suddenly felt a powerful urge to lick his pale eyelashes. It took willpower to resist. How funny. Her widening smile emboldened him to lean down and kiss her, tentatively at first, then lingering on the soft pillows of her lips, then more passionately. Soon he was not simply a person to her anymore but a kiss, then he was not just a kiss to her anymore but a part of herself she needed to feel alive again.

Later, returning home, she felt light as fish bone. She was raining and she was going to rain, she was mist and traveling light, she was the sun gone down and shadows clinging to the earth. The sky had cleared and the moon was a bright circle surrounded by darkness. It gets pregnant, she thought, gives light, triggers lunacy. Darkness isn't really an absence of light. God didn't banish the darkness, he *separated* the darkness from light, that was all. Noon was just another form of midnight. Everything is made up of opposing forces, light and dark, growth and decay, male and female—not as opposites, but unfolding together continuously, and must be so for the world to keep its balance. She thought of Frederik's touch, and of how the violin remembers, how both people and objects are changed by all those they know well. Even the river, she mused, as she turned off of Prisengracht and crossed the first of four footbridges. It tastes so many strange things in its travels, some lovely, others foul. Is it also changed by them? Soon her house on Warmoesstraat rose into view with candles flickering in the two downstairs windows, as was the law, but not upstairs, and that was a relief. She needed to be alone to replay the events of the evening and let them sink in, without having to explain what she didn't fully understand to anyone, not even herself.

Henry's Room

Elizabeth Hand

It was not yet dark when Henry arrived back at the Workingmen's House, still light-headed from what he'd witnessed: a girl entering the tunnel of a dark ride at the amusement park, and not returning. Not just him, that boy Pinhead had seen it too. Henry knew what went on in the dark, big hands squeezing things. You couldn't breathe. No one could breathe. They flopped around like toys with the sawdust running out of them.

He slumped through the rear door of Workingmen's House, trudged upstairs to the third floor, then down the long corridor to his room. His nostrils burned as he inhaled the scent of the same lye cleanser he used to mop the hospital floors. All the doors were closed. When he first moved here that had frightened him. Save for a few stints at the Cook County Insane Asylum, Henry had spent much of his life at the Asylum for Feebleminded Children in Lincoln. He was accustomed to scores of boys crammed into dormitories, sometimes two to a bed. Closed doors were for punishments and things he couldn't explain, even to Willhie.

"Willhie, Willhie, will he, won't he?" he whispered. Willhie always told him to knock it off, the rhymes made Henry sound nuts. *Dir kléngt verréckt!*

Yet he wasn't feebleminded or insane. When he was four years old, his mother had died while giving birth to his sister. He never knew what happened to the baby. Did she die too? Was she given away? Stolen? No one ever told him. He'd spent the last twenty years imagining her face in that of every pretty child he saw. They were like the dolls lined up as prizes behind the arcade amusements, the cane-rack game and sharpshooting galleries, curious toys he yearned for without understanding why.

And yet he couldn't help but long for them, the way he'd longed for the pictures and words in the Sunday funnies, even before his father taught him

to read when he was three years old. Or the way he felt when he started fires in the alley behind their tenement building, watching the flames wriggle from little piles of splintered wood and old newspapers until the blaze reached as high as the first-floor windows and someone called the fire engine, a clamor of bells and shouting and hooves and wheels in the smoke-filled streets. He had an aching curiosity about the world, a sensation that had no name. Where did the flames hide before they emerged? What happened to his baby sister? What happened to all those children he'd known in the asylum? Why were they scared of him, when he was smaller than they were?

As a boy he'd hated small girls, also babies. He attacked his classmates at St. Patrick's School in Chicago, where he carried a long-bladed knife and a blackjack hidden in the pockets of his dungarees. He started fires in vacant buildings just to watch them burn.

Other children were afraid of him. In the classroom he twitched and made frog noises and invented rhymes, trying to be funny so the other children would like him. Nobody laughed. He pretended to throw things—snowballs and baseballs that no one could see. Sometimes he forgot he was pretending. He drew crude imitations of characters from the Sunday funnies in the margins of his classwork.

"Crazy Daisy!" they'd shout when they saw him coming. Then he'd chase them, throwing real rocks or brandishing his knife.

He'd skip school, and spend his days roaming the streets on his own. Finally, when he was twelve, his father had him committed to the Lincoln Asylum. He ran away repeatedly but was always captured.

He'd only escaped for good when he was seventeen. He walked 165 miles back to Chicago, where his aunt and uncle took him in for a few weeks. His aunt got him the janitor job at St. Joseph's Hospital, mopping floors, cleaning sinks and toilets, emptying pails full of blood-soaked bandages and bits of skin.

Every morning, he'd start in the basement and work his way to the top floor. Strange voices came from storerooms that were supposed to be empty. Sometimes he heard people laughing or screaming in their hospital beds. Here again his curiosity overwhelmed him, as he cracked the door

open to peer inside, excited and fearful as when he entered the spook house at Riverview, sometimes accompanied by a stranger, more often alone.

But most days here at the hospital, no one spoke to him at all. Not one word.

There was an elevator at the hospital but he was forbidden to use it. So he lugged the heavy metal bucket and wringer and a rope mop taller than he was, up and down eight flights of stairs. He emptied filthy water in the utility sink on each floor, filling the bucket again on the next. The lye soap burned the skin on his hands until his knuckles bled. At night he'd toss and turn on his thin mattress, struggling to sleep because of the pain in his back and shoulders.

One of the few people who spoke to Henry was his boss, Sister Rose. She was mean as a snake, with cold black eyes and a nearly lipless mouth. When she knew no one was looking, she'd pinch the back of his neck.

Only Sister Dymphna ever showed him any kindness. An obese woman with a feathery birthmark on one cheek, she was named for St. Dymphna, virgin martyr and patron of the insane. Sister Dymphna had given Henry a scapular of her namesake.

The holy card showed a dainty red-haired girl with a halo. A bloody line indicated where her head had been cut off then miraculously reattached, as with red thread. Henry wore the scapular beneath his undershirt, even when he was asleep. Sometimes he withdrew it to gaze at while working.

He reached his door, unlocked it, and went inside. The room was small and hot as a bakery. There were two narrow iron bedsteads pushed against opposite walls. Two identical wooden desks with chairs. Two nightstands, each outfitted with a Bible. A large crucifix on the wall, rushes from Palm Sunday still tucked behind it. The single narrow window overlooked an air shaft.

His roommate, old Tom Phelan, snored in his bed. Tom had a shaking sickness that everyone said wasn't the palsy. He'd been at the seminary, studying to be a priest, but got the boot when his shaking interfered with his studies.

Henry didn't believe it was the palsy or any other malady. He'd seen his own father and plenty of other drunks get the shakes. He watched Tom for

signs of secret drinking but never saw him take anything stronger than hot tea. He still preferred to think his roommate was a drunk. It made life more interesting.

He shut the door, tiptoed to Tom's bedside, and stared down at his slack white face, his gaping mouth, and scrawny chicken neck. Sometimes Tom's eyes opened and he gazed up in horror as Henry scurried across the room.

But he had to make sure the old man was asleep. He held his palm above Phelan's face, lowered it until it almost covered the man's mouth. *Press press, where's your dress?* He felt Tom's breath moist against his fingers, smelled it too, tobacco and tea. *You're disgusting has anyone told you how disgusting you are.*

He turned and stepped to his desk, opened the drawer, and removed a handwritten manuscript bound in string. He'd salvaged the yellow paper from trash bins on the third floor, where most of the doctors had their offices. Doctors were profligate with paper. One tossed an entire ream because it had gotten damp and spotted with mold. Henry had brought it back to his room, where he dried it on the radiator. He also had stolen some onionskin, the very thin paper used for writing airmail letters.

He set the manuscript on his desk. He'd written the title in meticulous block letters, using a thick pencil he'd pilfered from a nurse's desk.

THE ADVENTURES OF GENERAL HENRICO DARGERO OF THE GEMINI AND THE BLACK BROTHERS AND OF THE GIRLS ARMY THAT FOUGHT BESIDE THEM IN THEIR BATTLE AGAINST THE CONFEDERACY OF THE CLAN OF THE AGIVECENNIANS

By Henry Joseph Darger

The author of this exciting story

He ran a finger beneath the string but didn't undo the knot yet. *Too soon and you're a loon.* He reached into the back of the drawer, removed a votive candle in a red glass holder and a box of matches. He'd pocketed candle

and holder in the hospital chapel, where he attended mass every day. His room had an electric light, but whenever he turned it on after dark, old Tom woke up. Candles were verboten in the Workingmen's House. The Great Fire had been over forty years ago, but the city remained haunted by the specter of conflagration. If Tom knew he had a candle, he'd report him to Sister Rose. He'd be beaten, maybe even arrested.

But he couldn't read or write in total darkness. He struck the match and held it to the wick. Once the candle flared to life, he sat, untied the string binding his manuscript, and began to turn the pages of his book. He'd begun it four years ago, working on it in every spare moment: a story that unraveled a great mystery. Someday, well-known editors would help him and it would be read by hundreds, maybe thousands, of people.

He stopped to peruse a picture he'd drawn of an outsized, misshapen hand clutching someone's throat. The someone was meant to be a girl but looked more like a turnip that had been set on fire. The hand resembled a bear's paw, or maybe a mitten.

Not one of his better efforts. He continued shuffling pages until he came to one filled with more blocky writing.

Never had General Dargero encountered such a foe as that evil General Forestor. "My heart fills with pity for those brave Girls" he thought. "How they will escape i cannot imagine. He has defiled this once beautiful countryside and when he lets the floods loose there will be no safe refuge for anyone, Least of all these brave Girls. Brave though they may be they are shockingly outnumbered."

He read it twice with approval. The page needed an illustration. He glanced over his shoulder at Tom Phelan, and from the drawer withdrew a cardboard folder. Open, the folder revealed dozens of pages from newspapers and magazines, culled from trash bins in the hospital and street. Pictures of children, nearly all of them girls. Only here were they safe, only here could he protect them.

He sorted through them as though they were the books he'd coveted in the library at the asylum, the stories that fascinated him nearly as much as the fires and little girls. Dotty Darling from the *Woman's Home Companion*. The rosy-cheeked Campbell's Soup Kids; a sleeping child from an

advertisement for Kellogg's Toasted Corn Flakes. Little Nemo and Princess Ozma, the latter torn from a library book at the asylum. A photograph of girls sewing at a Home School, and a chubby *Good Housekeeping* tot. The Kewpies. Illustrations from the *Girls Sewing Book*. Life-sized dolls in sundresses gay as a garden. A holy card depicting St. Joan in armor, hair shorn and a sword in her upraised hand, leading an army of blonde angels.

He traced their faces with a calloused finger. All those round eyes and dimpled cheeks, white throats and Kewpie-doll mouths, ringlets topped by immense butterfly bows. The world was full of girls, real and unreal.

He took out a sheet of onionskin and laid it over the smiling face of Princess Ozma. He loved to draw but always encountered a chasm between what he imagined and what he produced on the page. The longest, most painstaking sessions with pencils and crayons resulted in lumpen figures that resembled goblins more than the children and Civil War soldiers he'd set out to depict.

As a boy at the asylum school he'd secretly traced illustrations he found in books. The Oz tales were best for this—the original pictures were done in firm yet flowing black lines, and there were many of them. He traced countless pictures of Dorothy Gale and her friends, especially Princess Ozma, the girl who turned into a boy. There was a good picture book about the Battle of Gettysburg too. He copied its fierce generals and brave soldiers and, as the months passed, began to combine these drawings with those of the girls from Oz. He gave the characters new names, and sent them on their own adventures. The girls brandished firearms and sabers; the Scarecrow and Tik-Tok took their places among the good generals.

All of this came to an end when he was discovered one afternoon by the asylum school's librarian.

"I wondered who'd been vandalizing all those books." Knocking the volume from his hands, she slapped him so hard he fell from his chair. "Who's going to pay for that, you imbecile?"

He attacked her as she snatched up his drawings, and ended up being beaten with a hose then left alone in a concrete cell for two days. It was only since he'd arrived at the Workingmen's House that he'd begun writing and drawing again.

He traced Princess Ozma's mouth, but his pencil was too dull and the onionskin kept tearing. Frustrated, he balled up the paper and stuffed it into the drawer, opened the folder, and slipped the picture of Ozma back inside. He sorted through the other papers until he found a scrap of newsprint that felt like velvet, so worn was it from handling. His most precious possession, even more precious than his manuscript: a newspaper photograph of a five-year-old girl, fair-haired, her ghostly face bleached out so that only her eyes and mouth could be clearly seen. Elsie Paroubek. She looked otherworldly, elfin, her expression one of slight alarm, more sprite than living child.

She was no longer living. His eyes welled, the image blurred as he brought it to his face and pressed it against his mouth.

"Dearest one," he whispered.

He shut his eyes and saw her face floating before him, her tiny mouth and dark eyes. He bent over the picture, hands in his lap, and waited for the happy spell to come. Afterward he rocked back and forth, weeping silently as he prayed for forgiveness. When his grief subsided, he replaced the newspaper fragment in the folder and gathered up the pages of his manuscript. He tied them back together with the piece of string, his clumsy, damaged fingers fumbling with the knot. He opened the drawer and put everything back inside. Last of all, he blew out the votive candle, set it with his other things, and closed the drawer.

In the room behind him, Tom Phelan kicked out, gave a muffled cry, and turned over in his bed. Henry stood and undressed, folding his clothes before pulling on his nightshirt. He knelt beside his bed and said his prayers, fingering the scapular. When he finished, he made the sign of the cross, stood, and crawled under the covers. Within a few minutes he was sleeping soundly.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DIANE ACKERMAN is the author of twenty-four works of nonfiction and poetry, including *The Zookeeper's Wife* (W. W. Norton), *A Natural History of the Senses* (Random House), and *The Human Age* (W. W. Norton). She has received the John Burroughs Nature Award, the Orion Book Award, the PEN/Henry David Thoreau Prize, and the Jan Karski Humanitarian Award, among other honors. A film version of *The Zookeeper's Wife* appeared in 2017.

JULIANNA BAGGOTT's many poetry collections and novels include *Pure* (Grand Central/Hachette) and *Harriet Wolf's Seventh Book of Wonders* (Little, Brown/Hachette), both *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year. Her stories, essays, and poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Agni*, at Tor.com, and on NPR. She teaches screenwriting at the Florida State University Film School.

ANN BEATTIE has written over twenty novels and short story collections, most recently, *The Accomplished Guest* (Scribner). *A Wonderful Stroke of Luck* (a novel) will be published by Viking in April 2019.

MATT BELL is the author of the novels *Scrapper* and *In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods*, as well as the short story collection *A Tree or a Person or a Wall* (all Soho Press). A native of Michigan, he teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Arizona State University. His contribution to this issue is excerpted from a novel in progress.

MARTINE BELLEN has written nine collections of poetry and three opera libretti. Her most recent collection is *This Amazing Cage of Light: New and Selected Poems* (Spuyten Duyvil).

SARAH BLACKMAN is the director of Creative Writing at the Fine Arts Center, a public arts high school in Greenville, South Carolina. She is the co-fiction editor of *DIAGRAM* and the founding editor of *Crashtest*, an online magazine for high school–age writers and artists. Her books *Mother Box and Other Tales* and *Hex* were both published by FC2.

GREGORY NORMAN BOSSERT's short fiction sprawls across genre boundaries; recent works appear everywhere from *The Best Science Fiction of the Year: Volume Two*, edited by Neil Clarke, and *The Best Horror of the Year: Volume Nine*, edited by Ellen Datlow (both Night Shade Books) to *The Saturday Evening Post* to *Conjunctions:69, Being Bodies*. His story "The Telling" won the 2013 World Fantasy Award. He lives across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, where he works for Lucasfilm.

In 2016, longtime *Conjunctions* contributor CAN XUE was shortlisted for the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature; in 2015, her novel *The Last Lover* (Yale University Press) received the Best Translated Book Award.

MAUD CASEY is the author of four works of fiction, most recently *The Man Who Walked Away* (Bloomsbury) and a book of nonfiction, *The Art of Mystery: The Search for Questions* (Graywolf). She is a recipient of the Calvino Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the St. Francis College Literary Prize.

CHEN ZEPING has published widely in the field of Chinese linguistics. In addition, he has translated a number of contemporary Chinese writers into English in collaboration with Karen Gernant, including Can Xue, Zhang Kangkang, Alai, Yan Lianke, and Shi Tiesheng.

SAMUEL R. DELANY's works include *Dhalgren* (Vintage), *The Atheist in the Attic* (PM Press), and the forthcoming *Letters from Amherst*

(Wesleyan University Press). He has won both Hugo and Nebula Awards from the World Science Fiction Convention and the Science Fiction Writers of America. He lives in Philadelphia.

JEFFREY FORD's most recent novel is *Ahab's Return: or, The Last Voyage* (William Morrow/HarperCollins), and his most recent collection is *A Natural History of Hell: Stories* (Small Beer Press).

KAREN GERNANT, professor emerita at Southern Oregon University, has collaborated with Chen Zeping in translating more than ten books of contemporary Chinese fiction, the most recent of which is Can Xue's novel *Frontier* (Open Letter).

LAUREN GREEN is an MFA candidate in fiction and poetry at the University of Texas at Austin's Michener Center for Writers. She is the recipient of Columbia University's Louis Sudler Prize in the Arts, as well as *Glimmer Train*'s Short-Story Award for New Writers.

ELIZABETH HAND is the author of fifteen award-winning novels and five collections of short fiction and essays. She divides her time between the coast of Maine and North London. Her novel *Curious Toys* (Mulholland Books/Little, Brown), inspired by the artist Henry Darger and the 1915 Chicago murder of five-year-old Elsie Paroubek, will be out in 2019. Her contribution to this issue is excerpted from *Curious Toys*.

BRANDON HOBSON's novel *Where the Dead Sit Talking* (Soho Press) is a finalist for the 2018 National Book Award. His work has appeared in *The Pushcart Prize XL: Best of the Small Presses*, *Conjunctions*, *NOON*, *The Believer*, *Puerto del Sol*, and in many other journals. He is a member of the Cherokee Nation Tribe in Oklahoma.

CATHERINE IMBRIGLIO is the author of *Parts of the Mass* (Burning Deck), which received the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America, and *Intimacy* (Center for Literary Publishing), which received the Colorado Prize for Poetry. She teaches at Brown University.

GREG JACKSON is the author of *Prodigals: Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), for which he received the National Book Foundation's 5 Under 35 Award and was named one of *Granta*'s Best Young American Novelists. In 2014, he was a finalist for the National Magazine Award in Fiction.

A. D. JAMESON's books include *I Find Your Lack of Faith Disturbing: Star Wars and the Triumph of Geek Culture* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and, with artist Andrew DeGraff, *Cinemaps: An Atlas of 35 Great Movies* (Quirk Books). Last May, he received his PhD in creative writing (fiction) from the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

MADELINE KEARIN is a PhD candidate in historical archaeology at Brown University. Her work examines the construction and administration of insane asylums as therapeutic environments in nineteenth-century New England. Her first literary publication, "Fallout," appeared in *Conjunctions:67, Other Aliens*.

DAVE KING's novel *The Ha-Ha* (Little, Brown) won the 2006 Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His poems and stories have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Fence*, and other venues, and his story "The Stamp Collector" is included in *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2018*. A memoir about his 1974 travels is in the works.

WILLIAM LYCHACK is the author of the forthcoming novel *Cargill Falls* (Braddock Avenue Books). He teaches writing at the University of Pittsburgh and is at work on an account of his time in the monkhood in Burma.

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ELENI SIKELIANOS is the author of *Make Yourself Happy* (Coffee House Press) and the forthcoming *What I Knew* (Nightboat), among other titles. The poem in this issue is from a new manuscript in progress, *Your Kingdom*.

LAURA VAN DEN BERG is the author of two short story collections and two novels, most recently *The Third Hotel* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Her honors include the Bard Fiction Prize, the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Pushcart Prize, and an O. Henry Award. Born and raised in Florida, she currently lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she is a Briggs-Copeland Lecturer in Fiction at Harvard University.

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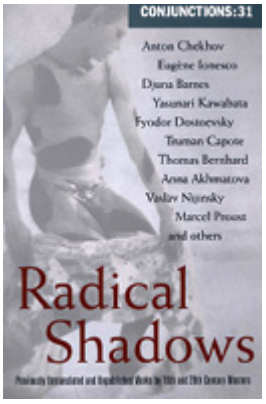

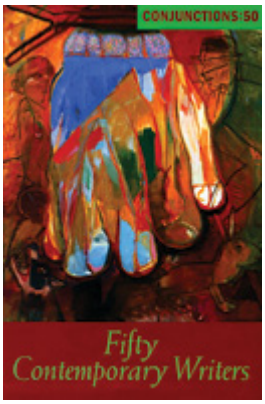

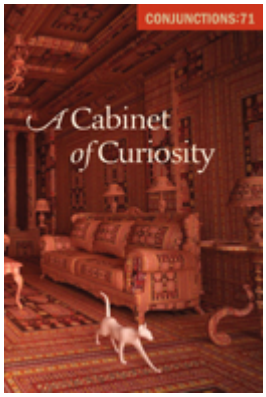

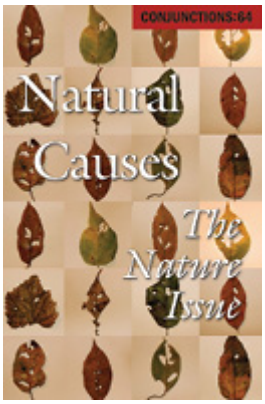

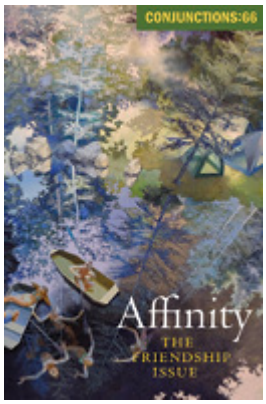

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